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THEY SAID IT

Thus, Pinocchio provides the occasion to discuss growing up and becoming truly human – as well as the way virtues such as love, courage, and truthfulness are essential to that process. The Velveteen Rabbit and the Little Mermaid draw us into what Guroian calls the longing for immortality. The Wind in the Willows, Charlotte's Web, and Bambi are books about friendship – a subject of great importance in the lives of children. But the last two of these books are about friendships between unequals (Charlotte/Wilbur; the old stag/Bambi); hence, Guroian reads them as finally teaching us about the importance of those who are not only friends but also mentors to children.

Gilbert Meilaender, in a review of *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*, by Vigen Guroian, "The University Bookman," Spring, 1999.

OBAMA, HISTORY, AND NEMESIS.

One of the distinct advantages of conservatism – *true* conservatism – over those political ideologies and temperaments that tend to predominate among today's political class is the understanding that the world's problems and related potential pitfalls did not materialize out of thin air along with the current president, congress, election cycle, or generation. Though the specific details of mankind's day to day existence and struggles may change from age to age, man's nature and the core difficulties he must face remain unchanged, as do the ways in which his nature and his difficulties interact. This knowledge serves conservatives well, providing both a comfort amidst despondency and an awareness that is lacking among those who would ignore the lessons taught by the mistakes and the successes of their ancestors. With regard to this latter point, the philosopher George Santayana was, as usual, correct in noting that:

Progress, far from constituting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

A conservative understands, for example, that the benefits of studying history, literature, and literary histories accrue not just from one's exposure to the ideas and philosophies of "dead, white males," but from the wisdom of the ages collected in the tales and the players. Shakespeare's tragedies contain not only the outlines of history, but also timeless moral lessons. The Bard's depictions of "heroes" who mix tragic character flaws with many of the graces and gifts desired and revered by humanity since time immemorial warn against a lack of self-awareness in man's affairs and dramatically demonstrate the impact that this can have on the individual and on society at large.

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In this Issue

Obama, History, and Nemesis.

The Coming Regional War?

Too many of today's political elite, including both Democrats and Republicans, have no apparent appreciation or knowledge of history and literature. One such simpleton can be found residing at the Naval Observatory in Washington and traveling the world on Air Force 2. While his constant public displays of an untutored mind could theoretically undermine public respect for and confidence in their government, the nation's beloved Vice President, Joe Biden, has achieved the dubious honor of being regarded as a harmless fool, which mitigates the potential harm he might otherwise cause. And sometimes, like so often is the case with children, his public gaffs contain an unintended spark of wisdom.

Such was the case last weekend, when good old Joe was trying to stir the labor movement to action, using a literary reference about which he was delightfully clueless. For those who missed it, he told members of the AFL-CIO that they are "the only folks who can stop the barbarians at the gate." The barbarians in his analogy, of course, are the Republicans, the political opposition, those who seek to modify the impact of an expensive, job-killing, deservedly-dying, and anachronistic employment paradigm.

Now, set aside for a second the hypocrisy involved here with the whole "civility" issue and the Democrats' purported desire to see the level of political discourse elevated. Focus instead on Biden's use of the phrase "barbarians at the gates," which is taken from a poem entitled "Waiting for the Barbarians" by C.P. Cavafy. And while this isn't as famous a poem as say, "Mary Had A Little Lamb," with which Biden would surely be familiar, it is hardly obscure. And furthermore, one would assume that if the occupant of the second highest political post in the land chose to cite this poem in a speech as a means of making an important point, he would at least have read and tried to understand it.

But, of course, one would be wrong to assume this. At least in the case of Joe Biden. For, the poem is, for the most part, concerned with the preparations that the movers and shakers in the Roman society of that

day are making in preparation for the arrival of the barbarians at the gate. Who don't show up. Which is not pleasing to them.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

You see, the barbarians in question were a crutch. They gave the Senators, the Emperor, the orators, the consuls, and the praetors something to do, something about which to worry, someone over whom to fret and to prepare to meet, be it in battle or in peace. But the barbarians weren't real, just as Biden's barbarians aren't real, but a prop used by him and his fellow Democrats to justify their existence. And just as in the poem, when night falls in the good old U.S. of A. and the people realize that they've been had, that there is no threat to them or to their families, because the barbarians are a fiction, they are going to be confused, bewildered, annoyed, and frankly, a little exhausted. And they will be exhausted with those who conjured up these barbarians out of whole cloth. We might have written about this ourselves. But Joe did it for us. Thank you, Joe.

More often than not, however, the lack of awareness of self and of history that plagues our political class has far more significant repercussions than merely to make a politician look foolish. In the broader political context, leaders who fail to see, to understand, and even to bother with the intricacies of history are ill-

prepared for the challenges that they will face. In a January, 2010 piece, the historian and classicist Victor Davis Hanson made precisely this point, using Greek history and the ancient Greek tragedies as the backdrop for his account and his observations regarding the above-mentioned fool's boss, Barack Obama:

The blueprint of a Sophoclean or even Euripidean tragedy is pretty straightforward. A confident, cocky tragic hero for about the first 600 lines of the play exhibits unconstrained exuberance as he takes on the world.

For an ancient fawning, first-half-of-the-play Greek chorus, read instead a contemporary Chris Matthews, *Newsweek*, or the *New York Times*.

The early Oedipus basks in his great wisdom and reason that had solved the riddle of the murderous Sphinx and saved the city. Creon in the *Antigone* assumes he is the personification of law, order, and stability, a savior regent after the prior mess.

Even in Euripides' *Bacchae*, young King Pentheus boasts about his kingly powers and youthful determination to corral the Bacchantes—as he sets himself up for a gruesome fall. Early Hippolytus is a sanctimonious puritan, a sort of insufferable prude (who of course will be falsely accused of fornication). Jason in the *Medea* prances around as if his dumped wife will agree that it was a wise idea for him to have married a younger, wealthier, and Greek princess. With all these personalities, the first person pronoun “egô” is commonly employed. They know at first no self-doubt. They have no clue that what brought them to such heights are the same characteristics, at the right occasion, and with a tad more hubris, that will ensure their fall.

During these displays of hubris, the flawed characters are warned by various seers, by close associates, and by the sometimes fawning/sometimes anxious chorus that something is not quite right. They are supposed to check their excesses in time. They are advised to seek the golden mean, calm down, and avoid nemesis. But how can they really, when it is all such fun, this being full of oneself that heretofore has brought them so easily so far? . . .

We've just about finished Obama's first 600 lines.

Obama and “nemesis” have, of course, tangled many times since this piece was written. And while Obama has been beaten pretty badly in each of their encounters, he is still not entirely defeated. He lives to fight again. Unfortunately for him, he appears to have learned nothing whatsoever from any of these confrontations and still, apparently, believes himself the possessor of extraordinary capabilities and wisdom.

Consider, for example, the dust-up last week over the timing of the President's speech on jobs. Obama, as you likely know by now, requested to make his speech at precisely the same time that the Republican presidential contenders were scheduled to have a debate at the Ronald Reagan Library. He requested, moreover, to make the speech before a joint session of Congress. The Speaker of the House John Boehner politely declined the White House's request, and the address was rescheduled for the following night (Thursday).

A number of Republicans and conservative commentators, including many whom we respect a great deal, have suggested that this demonstrates weakness and pettiness on the President's part. And that may be. But we don't think that the President's intention was to “show up” the GOP or to upstage his prospective opponents. We think that his real intention was to call more attention to himself and to his speech. “LOOK AT ME!” he screamed. And

everyone did. And so in this sense, he has won. Everyone looked and they will be looking still when he takes the grandest stage a president may take to make his address on jobs.

And it is here where nemesis will strike again.

You see, one of the most critical components of a successful political career is effectively managing expectations. And Obama is absolutely terrible at this. And he is terrible at it because he doesn't believe that he *needs* to manage expectations. Why should he, after all? Managing expectations is for losers who can't deliver. And he can deliver. Or so he thinks.

What else are we to conclude of a man who – in all seriousness – described the moment that he secured the Democratic presidential nomination thusly:

I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth.

Oh my! And what else are we to conclude of a man who has drawn the attention of the nation to himself by staging a faux fight with the opposition, who has commandeered the United States Capitol for a run-of-the-mill policy speech, who has spent months pondering and discussing this address, but who, by all accounts, intends to say absolutely nothing new, to propose nothing new, and simply to push for little more than that for which he has pushed all along? He has built this address up to the point where he must make it the best speech of his career. And instead, it appears that it will be the usual Washington, inside-the-Beltway blather. But he thinks he can get away with it because He Is Who Is, or something like that.

Obama is, in short, setting himself up for another encounter with nemesis, which is to say that he is setting himself up for political disaster.

Of course, he may well surprise us. He may give a magnificent speech. He may well propose something interesting, bold, and perhaps even workable. We doubt it, of course. But the man is occasionally given to surprises and is unquestionably possessed of some significant political gifts. And he may well put both to good use when he takes on the most awesome challenge of his presidency to date.

But it won't matter. Because this *is* the most awesome challenge of his presidency to date, but it didn't have to be. He made it so. And he made it so purely out of arrogance and ego. And now there is no possible way for him to meet the expectations he has created for himself.

We have repeatedly written that Obama, for all the hype, is not half the politician that Bill Clinton was. And we'll compound that now by saying that he is not and never will be half the president that George Bush was. Both of these men shared Obama's arrogance. (How could a president not?) But both were willing to learn from their mistakes and were willing to amend their behaviors in accordance with their personal histories and with history writ large. Clinton overcame his personal ideological rigidity, while Bush recovered from the conceit of presumed military invincibility to salvage the mission in Iraq before it was irretrievably lost. Obama, by contrast, shows no signs at all of having learned anything from history or from his own errors. Indeed, he shows no signs even of believing that he has made any errors.

This big address on jobs Thursday night is a terrible gamble for Obama. If he does everything right and performs spectacularly, he will gain nothing. The American people measure a man not by speeches but by results. At the same time, if he does not perform spectacularly, he stands to lose a great deal, since he will be performing in front of a grand audience on a grand stage, both of which he himself has insisted are necessary for a man of his stature. If he screws this up, his presidency is over.

Let us repeat that: *If Obama screws up this speech tomorrow night, he is done.* Nemesis will have won.

Whether that means Romney or Perry or someone else will also win, we can't say.

But we can say, from watching, reading, and studying history that it will be all but impossible for a man of Obama's ego to admit his failure, to correct his course, and to salvage himself and his presidency. If he were capable of any sort of self-reflection other than the kind that doomed Narcissus, he'd have undertaken it by now. But he's not.

THE COMING REGIONAL WAR?

Last week, Barack Obama's supporters were cheering his decision to support the Libyan rebels in their struggle against terror kingpin and dictator Muammar Gadhafi, patting him and themselves on the back as the rebel forces entered Tripoli and began the inevitable consolidation of power that will lead to the official end of the loathsome regime. This week, the cheers have quieted a bit as the reality of post-Gadhafi Libya begins to sink in among those same supporters – and among the rest of us. Three headlines from this weekend's news round-up help to explain why:

The first, from the *Associated Press*, reads "Libyan Rebels Begin to Round Up Black Africans." The second, from the French newspaper *Le Monde*, reads, "Mr. Belhaj: 'We want a civil state in Libya. We're not Al Qaeda,'" but contains an admission from "Mr. Belhaj" the newly appointed head of security for Tripoli, that he was(?) indeed a member of al Qaeda. The third is from the award-winning and renowned national-security journalist Bill Gertz at *The Washington Times*. It reads, as follows, and cites "U.S. intelligence agencies": "Jihadists Plot to Take over Libya."

Obviously, none of these headlines provides any certainty as to how things will ultimately work out in Libya. But each suggests, as we have written before, that the war to "liberate" Libya from Gadhafi was undertaken hastily, with no forethought, and with utter disregard for the possible consequences. And while the same arguments are often made about Iraq, the key

differences are that the Iraq offensive was undertaken in consultation with and with the full support of the U. S. Congress and was concluded with a U.S. military presence in country in order to ensure that the mess that was created by the ouster of Saddam Hussein did not engulf the entire region in war. No such precautions were or will be taken in Libya. The Libyan rebels now have themselves a great big country to do with as they please, for better or worse. And we're guessing "worse."

And speaking of "worse," to make matters worse, it turns out that The Political Forum is not the only entity that fears a regional war, although, as it turns out, it is probably the least important of those that do. Earlier this week, the Israeli news web site YNetNews.com reported the following:

Recent revolutions in the Arab world and the deteriorating ties with Turkey are raising the likelihood of a regional war in the Middle East, IDF Home Front Command Chief, Major General Eyal Eisenberg warned Monday.

"It looks like the Arab Spring, but it can also be a radical Islamic winter," he said in a speech at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

"This leads us to the conclusion that through a long-term process, the likelihood of an all-out war is increasingly growing," the IDF general said.

"Iran has not abandoned its nuclear program. The opposite is true; it continues full steam ahead," he said. "In Egypt, the army is collapsing under the burden of regular security operations, and this is reflected in the loss of control in the Sinai and the turning of the border with Israel into a terror border, with the possibility that Sinai will fall under the control of an Islamic entity" . . .

Referring to what he characterized as the possibility of a “radical Islamic winter,” Major-General Eisenberg said: “This raises the likelihood of an all-out, total war, with the possibility of weapons of mass destruction being used.”

During his address, the senior IDF official revealed that new, more lethal arms surfaced in the hands of Gaza terror groups during the latest round of fighting in the area. As result of the disturbing development, Israeli civilians were instructed to adopt greater precautions, he said.

“We discovered a new weapon, and as result of this we instructed the public to hide under two roofs, rather than only one,” he said.

Careful readers will note a couple of things. First, the IDF is warning that the Palestinians have possession of a new and dangerous weapon. The only reason for the Israelis to go public with this is to begin to prepare the international community for their response to this weapon. What this means is that things are very likely to turn very ugly, very fast.

The Israelis, as a general rule, explain their behavior afterward, making no apologies for defending themselves and no excuses for having to use overwhelming force to prevent the wholesale slaughter of innocent civilians, both *Israeli and Palestinian alike*. If the IDF is breaking with tradition here, there must be a reason, and we don’t find it particularly reassuring.

The article ends ominously, mentioning that “Notably, Eisenberg’s remarks were approved for publication by censorship officials,” which is to say that they were approved by the government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who does not play games with his nation’s security. Why Bibi’s government would choose to go public with this now, we can’t say for sure. But we can say that it gives us the creeps.

Second, readers will note Eisenberg’s mention of the “Sinai,” which we also mentioned two weeks ago in a similar vein. The Sinai, of course, is Egyptian territory, returned to Egypt as part of the 1979 peace treaty. It is also little more than an afterthought to the current Egyptian interim-regime, which has neither the interest nor the energy to worry about the once-secure but rapidly degenerating Sinai border with Israel. This reference to Sinai takes on greater relevance if you recall that back in May, in the days after the killing of Osama bin Laden, we wrote the following:

If we had to guess, we’d guess that bin Laden’s death means that the central front will shift again, this time to Egypt, then to the Arabian Peninsula and on to Israel. And this time, the shift will come as a result of the Islamists’ will.

The Taliban will be allowed, we suspect, to fend for itself and to protect its meaningless “sanctuary” alone, while the real prizes – Cairo, Giza, Alexandria, and the Nile – will be up for grabs. From there, control of the Hajj, Islam’s holiest sites, and the world’s largest oil reserves will be on the table. And in this effort the alleged mortal enemies – Shia and Sunni Islam – will work together to advance Islam and to destroy the infidels.

You see, three weeks ago, Palestinian terrorists, crossed into Egypt proper and from there into the Sinai. And since the Egyptians no longer bother to guard the Sinai border, said terrorists were essentially free to do as they pleased. And what they pleased was to attack Israel. As *Newsweek’s* web site “The Daily Beast” reported:

The series of ambushes on Israeli targets along the Egyptian border today exacted a painful price for Israel: seven dead and nearly 30 wounded. In the long run they point to an ominous trend: Egypt’s Sinai desert, where the gunmen originated, is drifting toward lawlessness.

In at least four separate attacks, gunmen who had slipped across the border fired on Israeli buses and cars and ambushed troops, according to a preliminary investigation carried out by law enforcement. Other militants fired rockets toward the same border area, in what appears to have been a coordinated operation. Six of the seven people killed were traveling in a car when it was hit by an antitank missile . . .

Israeli officials have been worried since Mubarak was ousted that a weak central government would spell problems along the Israeli-Egyptian border, which is largely unfenced. In the aftermath of the attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised to accelerate the building of the fence along the frontier.

Ah . . . yes. More fruits of the Arab Spring.

Add it all up and you have a very high probability that the . . . umm . . . doo-doo is about to hit the fan. You have chaos in Libya with various factions vying for power. Among other things, the Islamists are planning to battle it out with the alleged “democrats,” while the democrats have begun to round-up and (presumably) assassinate regime “collaborators,” many of whom just happen to be black. This “democratic” faction also manages to employ those with al Qaeda ties to handle security.

Meanwhile, you also have chaos in Egypt, where the army is technically in control but only for the time being. The Islamists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, are about to consolidate power, about to form a new government, and about to write a new constitution. Additionally, the border with Israel is now largely unguarded, is home to Bedouin insurgents who have allied themselves with Hamas, and is becoming a source for illegal weapons and terrorist crossings into Israel.

You also have Palestinians who are armed with “new” and dangerous weapons. You have chaos in Syria. You have nukes being built in Iran. And you have Islamists in Turkey.

More to the point, we suppose, you also have a clueless, anti-Israel, self-absorbed, politics-obsessed neophyte in the White House with neither the experience nor the interest to address the current and rapidly evolving situation. There is every chance that before the year is out, the entirety of North Africa – from Tunisia to Libya to Egypt to Sudan – will be controlled by Islamists, most of whom gained power as a result of the so-called Arab Spring that the Obama administration supported and encouraged. And that administration appears not only clueless about this possibility but indifferent as well.

Finally, to top it all off, *Maariv*, the second-largest Hebrew-language newspaper in Israel, is now reporting that American Democratic party strategist Stanley Greenberg – a onetime adviser to Bill Clinton and John Kerry – is the organizing force behind the domestic, economic protests that have been targeting the Netanyahu government all summer in attempt to destabilize the Prime Minister’s coalition at this particularly sensitive time. Greenberg, you may recall, also worked to oust Netanyahu from office in 1999, when he and other members of the Clinton team (e.g. James Carville) helped put Ehud Barak into office. Barak, for his part, then proceeded immediately to try to give away all of the occupied territories to the Palestinians in a desperate bid for “peace.” The offer was, unsurprisingly, rejected by the late terror-mastermind (and Nobel Peace Prize winner) Yassir Arafat who apparently wanted more than Barak (and Clinton) could give.

So add that to the list of incredibly screwed up events underway in the Middle East for which the American ruling class has no remorse, about which it has no clue, and with regard to which it has no plan. The Israelis are preparing for war, clearly. The Islamists have long been prepared for war and are in the process of finding themselves an army (or two or three) with which to back up their ragtag bunch of terrorists, who just happen to be armed with “new” weapons.

Meanwhile the American administration is busy planning to make dramatic and earth-moving speeches about such unprecedented policy developments as extending unemployment benefits; and Democratic Party consultants are meddling in internal Israeli affairs in the hope of undercutting the current government and getting a more pliant, more left-wing prime minister elected.

Fortunately for The Political Forum, one of us is bald and the other of us might as well be. Otherwise, we'd be tearing our hair out right about now. This is nuts. It's also a prelude to, at the very least, a long period of instability, and possibly worse.

So, if you think oil prices are high now, just wait until the "regional war" starts, and until Obama is caught, once again, with that deer-in-the-headlights look in his eye. Like the Boy Scouts, our advice is to Be Prepared. And nervous.

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