

Stephen R. Soukup Publisher
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Mark L. Melcher Editor
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Observation fully confirms what reflection teaches us on this subject: Savage man and civilized man differ so much in their innermost heart and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair. The first breathes nothing but repose and freedom, he wants only to live and remain idle, and even the Stoic's ataraxia does not approximate his profound indifference to everything else. By contrast, the Citizen, forever active, sweats and scurries, constantly in search of ever more strenuous occupations: he works to the death, even rushes toward it in order to be in a position to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality. He courts the great whom he hates, and the rich whom he despises; he spares nothing to attain the honor of serving them; he vaingloriously boasts of his baseness and of their protection and, proud of his slavery, he speaks contemptuously of those who have not the honor of sharing it.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, 1755.

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THE STRATEGIC POLITICIANS HYPOTHESIS, REWORKED.

In case you missed it, Sarah Palin announced last week that she will not be running for president next year. If you happen to be scoring at home, that makes six Republican “white knights” – i.e. those granted instantaneous status as one of the front-runners – who have said “thanks, but no thanks” to the GOP in the last several months, and two in two weeks. And while it is not unusual for a high-profile politician, even an extremely ambitious one, to say no to a run at the White House, it is unusual for so many to refuse to run at a time when any one of them would have an excellent chance of winning their party’s nomination and entering the election campaign as an immediate favorite to become the big enchilada.

As things stand today, even the political futures markets make Obama a slight underdog to retain his presidency, which, for an incumbent who doesn’t yet have an opponent, is quite remarkable. Assuming the logical, which is that “the one” spends the next 13 months doing precisely what he has done for the last 13 months (and the 13 months before that; and the 13 months before that), there is no reason whatsoever to believe that his position next November will be any stronger than it is now, and a great many reasons to believe that he will be in even worse shape.

Moreover, everyone it seems, except perhaps the members of each of the Republican candidates’ families, is indifferent to the current slate of Republican primary candidates. Mitt Romney strikes conservatives as a leaden, incipient statist. Rick Perry seems proudly determined to run as an “anti-intellectual,” which, in his case, appears to be defined as a guy who isn’t all that smart. Ron Paul is the party’s crazy, old uncle who crawls

out of the attic once in a while to say something brilliant before he starts mumbling about tin-foil hats and pudding. Herman Cain seems interesting enough but knows less about policy and has less experience than even the woefully inexperienced Obama had. And the rest are, for whatever their merits may be, non-contenders. The field is, in short, desperately lacking someone about whom voters can get excited.

Given this exceptional confluence of circumstances, one would think that top-notch candidates such as Chris Christie or Mitch Daniels or Paul Ryan would be just aching to get into the race. Both the GOP nomination and the presidency – the most powerful job in the world, for crying out loud – are there for the taking. Yet no one wants them. Why not?

All of them have reasons, of course. Donald Trump was told by NBC to knock it off or they'd have to cancel his show. Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels has unfinished business in Indiana and has a complicated marital history that might cause the people he loves some embarrassment were he to run (his wife left him and their kids, married another man and then, after he had done the hard work of raising the kids, returned and they were remarried). Paul Ryan thinks he can have a greater impact on the issues that matter most to him as Chairman of the House Budget Committee. Sarah Palin likewise thinks she can have a greater impact by staying outside of electoral politics and playing kingmaker. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour doesn't want to give up every moment of his life for the next decade, and neither does New Jersey Governor Chris Christie who, like Barbour, is constantly mocked for his weight and, in addition, has four young kids he'd like to see grow up normally, that is, not in the White House.

Now, all of these reasons – plus many of those offered by the spinmeisters, the PR flaks, the analysts, and the pollsters – make a certain amount of sense, particularly to those of us who have never understood the attraction of electoral politics in the first place. On the other hand, these people *are* in the business of electoral politics, which, by definition, means that

they don't share the queasiness that, dare we say, *normal* people have at the thought of telling lies for a living, or telling the truth and getting hammered for it.

They enjoy this stuff. They like running for office. And they *love* winning elections. They think they have the best ideas. And each one thinks he (or she) is the most qualified for just about any political job there is. In short, they are among the very best at their trade. And that makes these official explanations sound to us a little more like *excuses*. These folks should be dying for a chance to run in this race. For politicians, it's the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup, the World Series, the America's Cup, the World Cup, the Masters, Wimbledon, and the Daytona 500, all wrapped up into one. Would Federer sit out Wimbledon? Would Carl Edwards watch the Daytona 500 from the bleachers?

Yet the top Republican contenders are sitting this one out. And even bearing in mind the reasonable and often heartfelt explanations for their respective refusals, the authorized storyline just doesn't make any sense. There is something else – some other force – at work here.

It occurs to us that likely the best description we're going to come up with of this "other force" is one that can be cobbled together from a couple of passages taken from a couple of old pieces we wrote several years ago. The first comes from the dawn of The Political Forum, way back in August 2002. It appeared in the "They Said It" section and was credited thusly: "*Probably told in a bar somewhere.* Mark L. Melcher." To wit:

There's an old joke about a player manager for a baseball team who pulls his shortstop from the game and goes in himself, telling the guy that he, the player manager, will show him, the short stop, how the position should be played. On the first pitch, the batter hits a hard line drive right to the player-manager shortstop. The ball tips off his glove and hits him smack dab on the forehead, knocking him unconscious. The players all run onto the

field and gather around him. Finally, he opens his eyes, looks up, sees, among the players looking down at him, the shortstop he pulled from the game, and says to him, “You’ve got this position so screwed up no one can play it.”

The second passage comes from a piece written almost three years ago exactly, as it was becoming indisputably clear that Barack Obama would defeat John McCain and be elected President of the United States. That piece, “President Obama: Socialism’s Sentinel Perdue,” may have been one of our most prescient of all time, predicting as we did the irreparable damage that a political amateur like Obama would do to the ideology of the left if (or when) he tried to solve the nation’s real and growing problems with the false promise of collectivist remedies. That was not, however, our only notable forecast in the piece, as even the half-joke that served as our introduction proved strangely visionary:

Now we are not experts on the mysterious nuances that America’s Orwellian “thought police” employ when seeking evidence of racism in the everyday pronouncements of the nation’s citizens. Indeed, rarely a day goes by that we don’t read something that someone has said that seems to us to be racist in nature, but that is regarded by the self-appointed experts on such matters as benign, only to hear of someone else on the same day being branded a racist for saying something that appears to us to be innocent of prejudicial overtones.

Nevertheless, despite our poor understanding of this arcane science, we have decided to toss a theory of our own into these treacherous waters. It is only a theory, mind you. But it is one that, if true, would expose the existence of a racially explosive plot by the nation’s largely Caucasian, political establishment to let a black guy take the fall for the

terrible mess that they have collectively made of things over the past several decades.

Of course, we have no solid evidence of such a conspiracy, but certainly, anyone who is paying any attention at all knows that the poor sap who wins the election next week doesn’t have a chance in hell of leaving the White House in four years with either high popularity ratings or a shred of dignity left. So why not hand this hopelessly impossible job to some poor black guy with the middle name of Hussein, with known links to terrorists, with ties to a noxious cabal of Chicago snollygosters, and with no experience in managing anything whatsoever, much less the most powerful nation in the world, and assume that his failure is likely to be so spectacular that the ultimate responsibility for the whole mess will fall on his shoulders rather than on those of the white crooks and mooncalves who made the mess in the first place.

And indeed, if one is seeking a guaranteed loser to take the ultimate blame for the on-going economic meltdown, the astounding proliferation of corruption, and the growing social tensions among classes and races it would difficult to find a better candidate than a black socialist whose understanding of economics appears to begin and end with the musings of Sidney and Beatrice Webb who is either highly comfortable around crooks or too stupid to recognize one even when the guy buys him a house, and who says and does things that make sensible people question his affection for and ties to America’s traditional culture.

Now we are admittedly kidding around a little here. But nevertheless, one has to recognize the irony in the fact that the

first order of business for the nation's first black president, if he is elected next week, will be the Herculean task of cleaning the dung out the Augean stables left behind by the best and the brightest among America's white elite.

Can we call 'em or can we call 'em?

What you get if you take these two snippets and put them together is a pretty clear and pretty ghastly picture of the state of the nation. Three years ago, the country was in very bad shape, so bad, in fact, that it was only half-facetious to suggest that the powers that be in the political class were willing to hand the reins of government over to an arrogant and ignorant fool for the express purpose of letting him take the fall for taking the measures that would be necessary to begin to remedy the root causes of the nation's ills.

But, as Robert Burns put it over 200 years ago:

The best laid plans of mice and men, gang aft agley,
An' lea' us nought but grief an' pain, for
promised joy!

It turns out that Obama was so arrogant and so ignorant – and had the help of an equally arrogant and ignorant bunch of fools on Capitol Hill – that he didn't even try to fix the problems. He actually made things worse, much worse.

And the smart politicians are in the same position they were in four years ago; that is, looking for another stooge to take the reins of government run amok.

The potential scenarios range from the not so good in historical terms, meaning no double-dip, continued slow growth and no wage growth, to the really bad, which means full-blown depression, a banking collapse in Europe, a crash-landing in China and more trouble than even a smart, well-educated, experienced executive would know how to handle.

The Fed is out of bullets. The economic bears, who were among the first to foresee the collapse in '08,

are now factoring in odds of “the ‘D’ word.” The President's party is desperately trying to force a trade/currency war with this nation's largest creditor. And the political class is hopelessly and rancorously divided, with maybe one or two adults shouting desperately into a vast playground of spoiled children doing precisely as they please.

In short, after three years, our friend, the neophyte-fall-guy-wannabe-king has “got this position so screwed up no one can play it.”

So we ask you: If you were the successful governor of Mississippi or Indiana or New Jersey; if you were the only person in Washington who has thought about and actually proposed legislation to incorporate market forces into the nation's entitlements and health care programs; if you were the shockingly popular and remarkably successful and influential ex-Governor of Alaska; would *you* run for president? Would you put it everything on the line to step in and take responsibility for this buffoon's three years of asininity? Would you want to be the guy who, four years from now is the subject of intra-party-primary-challenge rumors, all because three years was simply not enough time to clean up this guy's mess, plus all of the institutional corruption and idiocy he inherited?

Or would you find a reason to stay in your current position? Would you find an excuse to stay as far away from the presidency as you could?

We know that, like most politicians, these folks have egos that simply can't be measured. But in all honesty, if you saw the current situation as hopeless and knew, in your heart of hearts, that the next four years were going to be miserable and, frankly, unwinnable, wouldn't you bide your time and plan to emerge as the full-blown savior in 2016? Wouldn't you want to avoid being sullied by Obama's still burgeoning disaster?

We have a sneaking suspicion that the next five years are going to be pretty uncomfortable for a great many people, probably more uncomfortable for more people than the last three or four have been. If you believe the old “strategic politicians hypothesis” first

forwarded by the political scientists Gary Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, then you believe that most (Congressional) candidates will time their runs for office when they have the greatest opportunity to win. A modified version of that hypothesis for this particular presidential election would hold that the top-flight Republican contenders have decided that it is in their own best interests to run when they have the greatest opportunity to win AND not to look like fools for doing so.

And given the likelihood that the next several years will be tough, ugly, and divisive, who in his right mind would want responsibility for that? What “strategic politician” would want to run now instead of waiting until 2016, when the smoke will have cleared a bit, when the problems Obama inherited and those he created will be more obvious and more obviously addressable, and when he (or she) could have a much more positive impact on the country?

Chris Christie probably does want to see his kids grow up. Sarah Palin probably does love being a kingmaker and a TV star. Mitch Daniels almost certainly does not want to open up his life, his wife, and his daughters to greater public scrutiny. All of this and more is undoubtedly true. But our guess is that another factor involved in their decisions not to run is the prospect of having to deal with the mess that Obama inherited and then greatly exacerbated -- the prospect of having to play a position that is so screwed up that no one can play it.

These Republicans are all strategic politicians, in short, and they have made their choices based on reason, prudence . . . and an all-consuming fear that the worst is still to come.

Sigh.

OCCUPY WALL STREET AND THE EGALITARIAN STATE OF NATURE.

We are, to put it mildly, both fascinated and flummoxed by the protestors who have decided over the last few weeks and days to “occupy” Wall Street

and various other locations around the country. We have spent the better part of the last several days trying to put into words why this is the case, without much luck, largely because we’re not sure who these people are or what they want. And the reason we’re not sure about this, of course, is because they’re not sure about it either. As best we can tell, they’re a ragtag bunch of kids and aging hippies. The former are unhappy that they have accumulated tens of thousands of dollars in student loans and now can’t parlay their womyn’s studies degrees into high-paying jobs, while the latter are unhappy that they’re old and have nothing real or tangible about which to be upset any more. They miss the good old days and wish desperately to recapture the political power they once felt – not to mention the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll they once enjoyed.

Beyond that, these people and their protest strike us as pretty insubstantial. Nevertheless, we find them fascinating. And the reason we find them fascinating, we think, is that in spite of – or, more likely *because* of – their incoherence and nebulousness they exemplify, or at least have the potential to exemplify, two of the greatest and most pronounced failings of the modern leftist political enterprise.

If you look at the prominent protest movements from the last century or so, all had three basic elements in common, whcih the “occupy” movement decidedly lacks: Each had a defined and specific goal. Each was successful largely because of the specificity of its objective. And each advanced what could be called the “liberal” agenda. The suffragette movement in the teens sought the vote for women and succeeded with the passage on the 19th amendment in 1919. The labor movement during the Depression sought the right to organize unions and bargain collectively and won essential legal parity with management with the passage of the Norris-LaGurdia Act in 1932. The Civil Rights marchers in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s demanded the elimination of state-sanctioned and state-tolerated racial animus and discrimination and, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, won the official end of legalized racism as it had existed for a century since the Civil War. The Vietnam

protestors wanted an end to the war in Southeast Asia and succeeded in effectively crippling and eventually ending American participation and support for South Vietnam. And all of this advanced the cause of “liberalism” loosely defined.

Of course, beyond these basic and important struggles, liberalism persisted, but it also changed. The quintessential American liberalism, which was a classical liberalism at heart, dedicated principally to the expansion of liberty and judicious application of government power to achieve liberty, mingled with the “progressivism” that sprang from the Third Great Awakening and took upon itself the task of remaking society and perfecting it so as to make it as close to faultless and ideal as possible. The struggles for basic freedoms were won and so were overtaken by other struggles, struggles for greater resources. And the liberal ideology that once sought liberty was transformed and instead sought to make greater inroads into the function of erstwhile private enterprise and the erstwhile private lives of Americans, always with fewer tangible results to show for its efforts. This change in liberalism’s character and goals underlies the vagueness and the general sense of silliness that permeates the current Wall Street protests.

Consider, if you will, the purported impetus behind the Wall Street occupation. The protestors are angry about what they see as the corruption and inequality that exists in or that is a direct result of the actions of corporate America. And to some extent, they have a point. Yet, without question, the strength and corruption of the largest corporate entities in the country are the direct result of their collusion with the big government that the protestors themselves support and, indeed, revere.

As we noted in these pages three weeks ago and countless times over the years, Big Government and Big Business, like love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage, as the old song says. Big, “money sucking” corporations could not exert any influence at all, could not wield any undue power at all – could not, in short, “suck” any money at all – were they not

acting in collusion with the government itself, which not only facilitates this relationship but exacerbates and exaggerates it as it grows larger and larger. As you may recall, we put it this way:

The fact of the matter is that corporatism is but one of the literally dozens – if not hundreds – of “improved” versions of Marxism created to account for and overcome the shortcomings of the original theory. Corporatism is the formal alignment of government and corporate interests, as well as labor interests and other guilds of society, to manage said society for the benefit of “the people” as a whole rather than for the benefit of the small class of bourgeois aristocracy. It is an adaptation designed to overcome the fear of industrialists regarding proletarian violence, the stubborn unwillingness of the proletariat to engage in said violence, and the inability to maintain the means of production in the wake of such violence were it ever to occur, all of which were among the manifold failings of Marx’s fantasies....

The Progressives took the corporatist notions of the “societal organic” and the overarching predominance of economic and professional “associations” and applied them to their understanding of how an orderly, fair, enlightened, reformist, and well managed society should operate. What they developed and fostered, among other things, was the professional bureaucracy, designed to preclude the influence of political machinations and to intervene on behalf of society as a whole. This corporate notion in combination with a reliance on bureaucracy, in turn, nurtured what we know today as interest-group-liberalism, which was designed to provide each “association” a voice to speak to the

ruling class on behalf of its members and thereby to articulate the needs of the class as a whole.

The ultimate irony for us is watching Van Jones, the committed leftist and former Obama administration Green jobs “czar” join the protestors and encourage them as if he agrees wholeheartedly that the “corporations” and Wall Street are evil and must be destroyed. Meanwhile he collects a fat paycheck for his job working at the Center for American Progress, which is, of course, funded lavishly by currency speculator George Soros, and his old role in the administration is currently filled by Jeffrey Immelt, the Chairman and CEO of General Electric, a company that stands to make a killing from any environmental regulations the administration may issue with regard to carbon dioxide.

Yet Jones, like the rest of the protestors, is purportedly upset that some people aren’t getting “theirs.” And he’s upset that other people are getting too much of theirs. Or something. It’s really hard to tell, exactly.

What we think that he and the protestors in general are really upset about is the fact that the world isn’t perfect. They have had 75 years during which their progressivism-infused liberal ideology has dominated public policy in this country, and still Utopia remains elusive. They’ve tinkered with this and screwed with that and messed with the other, and all they’ve done is make things worse.

Why are so many people losing their homes? Because big government forced big banks to make loans to them to buy houses they couldn’t afford. Why are so many students saddled with so much student loan debt? Because big government made sure that they could get loans to go to school without having to save or work so that they could “enjoy themselves” and now they can’t find jobs with their useless degrees. Why are so many people without jobs? Because government spending outstripped government revenues and government borrowing squeezed out private borrowing, and because excessive regulation made business expansion too costly. *Etc., etc., ad infinitum.*

The bottom line here is that these people are upset that they’ve had everything that a progressive-liberal could want and instead of making things super-wonderful, all that’s happened is it’s made things worse. That, unfortunately, is one of the two critical problems with the leftist undertaking: it overpromises and then can’t deliver.

As we and countless others have noted before, this is the result of the left’s intellectual and ideological origins in the ancient and persistent Western eschatological and utopian traditions. As we have written in these pages before, the leftist enterprise is characterized principally by an affinity for the “egalitarian state of nature,” which the historian Norman Cohn has called one of the most persistent social myths in Western civilization. It posits the belief that man’s natural, pre-historical state was a “Golden Age” “in which all men were equal in status and wealth and in which no one was oppressed or exploited by anyone else; a state of affairs characterized by universal good faith and brotherly love and also, sometimes, by total community of property and even spouses.”

This myth of the egalitarian state of nature formed the foundation for the egalitarian rebellions that have plagued the West since time immemorial and underpinned the worldview of the odious social philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, as we noted two weeks ago, is the intellectual godfather of the modern left. In the opening line of *Emile*, Rousseau, declared that “Everything is good in leaving the hands of the creator of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” Rousseau’s critique of modern society and his lionization of pre-societal man are, perhaps, his most consistent themes. They are also his most powerful and far-reaching contributions to political philosophy.

In *The Second Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau argued forcefully that private property was the source of society’s ills. “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say this is mine, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.”

Nearly 250 years later, the American left has tried its damndest to implement Rousseau's credo and yet the world still is unfair. But rather than blame that credo or the ideology it inspired, they would prefer to stick to it and to blame the institutions. Having tried leftism, in short, and having seen it fail, they wish to blame the world for its non-compliance and try again with even greater leftism.

But they will fail again. And again. And again. As they always have.

Which brings us to the second great flaw in the leftist experiment. The process of repeated failure is, to most, the process of growth and education. But to the leftist, who expects perfection, it is the process of disillusionment. And historically this disillusionment is met in one of two ways: either with disengagement and the collapse of the movement or with incitement to violence.

Given the composition and the temperament of the current crowd, we're inclined to expect the former. As the days grow colder and the excitement of the game wears off, we expect these "rebels" to head for home and the luxury of mommy and daddy's warm basement, thereby ending the great "left-wing answer to the Tea Party."

That said, history is replete with examples of leftists who took the other tack and decided that their inability to achieve Utopia had to be someone else's fault and

that someone needed to be punished. From the Jacobins to the Anarchists to the Marxists and beyond – even up to and including President Obama's old pal Weatherman Bill Ayers – disillusioned leftists who chose not to give up, chose instead to kill. And there are plenty of "observers" inciting the protestors today to take a similar path.

We doubt that will happen, of course, but who can know for sure? These protestors fancy themselves the heirs to the protestors who won equality for women and blacks or who ended an arguably foolish war. But they are nothing of the sort. They are angry, spoiled children who, having been denied the results that their ideology promised have chosen to deny reality and to rage against the very machine that said ideology was responsible for building.

These occupiers of Wall Street are a sad and confused lot. This doesn't mean that they are hopeless, of course. They are right about some things, after all. They just don't know what it is they're right about or, moreover, who and what is to blame for those things about which they are wrong. We'd offer to help them figure it out, but we doubt they'd listen.

But then, what else is new?

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