

Stephen R. Soukup Publisher
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Mark L. Melcher Editor
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

However pure may be a social system, or a religion, in the commencement of its power, the possession of an undisputed ascendancy lures all alike into excesses fatal to consistency, to justice, and to truth. This is a consequence of the independent exercise of human volition, that seems nearly inseparable from human frailty. We gradually come to substitute inclination and interest for right, until the moral foundations of the mind are sapped by indulgence, and what was once regarded with the aversion that wrong excites in the innocent, gets to be not only familiar, but justifiable by expediency and use. There is no more certain symptom of the decay of the principles requisite to maintain even our imperfect standard of virtue, than when the plea of necessity is urged in vindication of any departure from its mandate, since it is calling in the aid of ingenuity to assist the passions, a coalition that rarely fails to lay prostrate the feeble defenses of a tottering morality.

The Heidenmauer, James Fenimore Cooper, 1832.

THE POPE, THE ATHEIST, AND HEADLESS SANTA.

What do an exhausted Pope; a recently deceased, notoriously atheistic British polemicist; and a “crucified skeleton Santa Claus” have in common? Well . . . for one, they are all unfortunate signs of the Christmas season, or at least of *this* Christmas season. More to the point, though, they’re all signs of societal collapse; collapse that may yet be averted, to be sure, but collapse that appears at least, to be more and more inevitable every day.

We don’t mean to sound overly dramatic here, but the Western world is in a tough spot right now. And believe it or not, this may be the toughest spot in which the West has ever been. And between the Pope, the atheist, and the now-headless Santa – in addition to more traditional political measures like the ultimately futile Republican primary process, the even more futile legislative process, and the ongoing travels of the “Vacationer-in-chief” – the portents of societal disaster continue to grow.

Let us start with the Pope, Benedict XVI, whose physical status is at once unsurprising, disheartening, and an obvious harbinger of potential impending calamity. Pope Benedict is tired, we are told, very, very tired, exhausted even. He is struggling to fulfill some of his duties; struggling to remain focused and to engage fully in the mission with which he has been charged. Or, as the *Associated Press* put it over the weekend:

Pope Benedict XVI seems worn out.

People who have spent time with him recently say they found him weaker than they’d ever seen him, seemingly too tired to engage with what they were saying. He no longer meets individually

In this Issue

The Pope, the Atheist, and
Headless Santa.

Subscriptions are available by contacting:

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

with visiting bishops. A few weeks ago he started using a moving platform to spare him the long walk down St. Peter's Basilica

[A] decline has been noted as Benedict prepares for next weekend's grueling Christmas celebrations, which kick off two weeks of intense public appearances. And that raises questions about the future of the papacy given that Benedict himself has said popes should resign if they can't do the job

[I]t seems the daily grind of being pope – the audiences with visiting heads of state, the weekly public catechism lessons, the sessions with visiting bishops – has taken its toll. A spark is gone. He doesn't elaborate off-the-cuff much anymore, and some days he just seems wiped out.

Most of this, of course, is attributable to the Pope's age. He will turn 85 next April, and even that portion of The Political Forum that is less than half his age finds itself completely exhausted simply by *reading* his schedule. Certainly a little slowdown is understandable and commensurate with his age and responsibilities.

At the same time, when we read that the Pope "seems worn out" or that "a spark is gone," we can't help but believe that there is something more at work here than simply the ravages of age. As we and countless others – most far more learned in these matters than we – have noted for as long as Benedict has been Pope, nearly seven years now, perhaps his most critical challenge has been to reinvigorate the faith in its historical homeland, Western Europe, where it had been supplanted over the last several decades, both by a radical, post-modern secularism and, to a lesser extent, by radical Islam. As we noted just over three years ago:

Pope Benedict XVI has made the restoration of Western religious and culture values one of the preeminent

goals of his papacy. A return to respect for and appreciation of every human life; a return to the values of reason and rationalism; a return to the belief that culture matters and that religious values can positively inform the culture, are all interim goals that the Pope has set in his attempt to restore the efficacy and the allure of the Church and of the values and ideals for which the Church and indeed all of Western civilization stand.

Even under the best of circumstances, this would have been a daunting and exhausting challenge. And the past few years have not, by any stretch of the imagination, presented anything close to the best of circumstances. Indeed, it's hard to imagine circumstances much worse.

Europe, you see, is home to much more than mere Christianity (to steal a phrase from C.S. Lewis). It is also home to the Utopian religious, social, and cultural movements that have sought, over the course of the last fifteen hundred years or so, to supplant traditional Christianity. We have neither the time nor the energy to go into these movements in any detail here. But then, nor do we have the need. The detail work was done long ago by the English historian Norman Cohn in his seminal work *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, and, as longtime readers know, has been cited in these pages countless times. It should, for our purposes today, suffice to say that the Church – and all of established civilization – fought these revolutionary and heretical spasms with all available resources for nearly the entirety of Western history. It is only within the last few hundred years, and over the last two centuries especially, that society has lagged in its pushback against the heresies.

Beginning with the French Enlightenment, the "intellectuals," as a class, started joining the anti-establishment, anti-Church revolutionaries; and the ranks of these anti-establishment resisters only grew over the years and the decades. By the time the twentieth century rolled around, nearly the entirety of European civilization – save the Church itself – had

been co-opted by one or both of the two great quasi-religious, post-modern, heretical, utopian upheavals against the traditional cultural order and traditional moral structure. Nevertheless, both were defeated, though not without much bloodshed and much misery.

The first of these, fascism/National Socialism, fell with comparative ease, if considerable blood, when it overreached and its leaders grew too greedy and too impatient. By contrast, the second, Communism, was not so easy to subdue and nearly conquered the globe. Indeed, it would have conquered all of Europe – rather than the mere half it did take – were it not for the resistance of the American and British anti-Communists and, in the end, a Polish Pope, the Blessed John Paul II. Before it was defeated, of course, Communism ravaged the planet, taking literally tens (if not hundreds) of millions of lives and subjecting countless millions more to torture, oppression, and lives of abject poverty. Marx’s great “utopia” proved precisely the opposite for most of its victims.

In retrospect, the outcome of the war against Communism – the Cold War – seems inevitable. Utopian schemes can’t help but fail; they are doomed from the start. But it did not seem that way during that “long, twilight struggle,” especially to the overwhelming majority of its participants and victims. It is worth remembering, in any event, that while a vast majority of Western institutions had pockets of Communist sympathizers – including the Church and its Liberation Theologians – and a great many more, most notable the academy, were completely dominated by sympathizers, immeasurable swaths of traditionalism remained and, eventually, won the day.

It is, unfortunately, hard to find evidence of the same today. While the hard, brash, utopian anti-traditionalism of the Communists has (more or less) been banished, a softer and, in many ways, more insidious version has replaced it. And this version has nearly completely infiltrated all of the institutions of the West – including those like conservative political parties, investment banks and brokerage houses,

and even many of the arms of the Church itself, institutions ostensibly dedicated to traditional values and free will and that might therefore be expected to resist such intrusions.

And this, sadly, brings us back to Pope Benedict and his exhaustion. How, pray tell, could the man not be exhausted, given the challenge before him? How could he not be exhausted given that he has spent the better part of his adult life trying desperately to save Europe from itself while Europe seems as determined as ever to ignore its history, to discard its cultural heritage, and to destroy its future in pursuit of a fiction? How could he not be exhausted when he has done everything within his power to confront a global economic melt-down and to shepherd his flock through this melt-down, all the while being undermined by those around him and watching those whom he would help plow deeper and deeper into irredeemable, utopian, socialistic fantasies based on such notions as: money can be borrowed indefinitely; loans need never be repaid; work is optional at best and, in some cases, akin to slavery; and preserving “unity” is far preferable to acknowledging reality?

If the Pope’s intention was – as we all assumed – to redeem the font of Christian civilization, then it’s not hard to see how this process could have exhausted him. As we noted at its outset (and have mentioned several times over the last several weeks) the Euro was, from the beginning, a disastrous and “vast new socialist experiment, built on the rubble of the old, smaller ones that blighted the European landscape.” And yet salvaging this “experiment” has become the preoccupation of nearly the entire continent, with all other concerns – including the practicality of salvaging the experiment – receiving no consideration whatsoever. The smart money still says that any solution will, over the long term, prove just as volatile and unrealistic as the current arrangement, but that will not stop the EUtopians from pursuing such a solution anyway, whatever the cost. How can a frail old man compete with that? And how can the effort not exhaust him completely?

What does any of this have to do with a now-deceased British journalist who was best known early in his career as a hard-core leftist and later in his career as a hard-core atheist? Well . . . nothing. And everything.

The journalist, columnist, polemicist in question is, of course, Christopher Hitchens, who died last week at the age of 62 from esophageal cancer. Interestingly, but not surprisingly to anyone who has bothered to read him, despite his youthful leftism and his persistent atheism, Hitchens was one of our – and of the political world’s – favorite writers. Everyone, it seems – left, right, religious, secular, aggressively anti-religious, Jewish, Muslim, American, British, whatever – seemed to have loved the guy or, at the very least to have respected his intellect and his incredible and incredibly persuasive polemical skills. This goes double for those who actually knew him. To be sure, there were those who did not like him. But outside of those whom he attacked first, we’d be hard-pressed to find a man or woman who had an uncharitable word to say about him in print, save his brother Peter, also a noted British journalist, who was forever trying futilely to save his brother’s soul and point out to him the folly of his religion-abhorring ways.

What we always found interesting and heartening about Hitchens (Christopher, that is) is that, despite his self-proclaimed status as a “man of the left” and as an atheist, he nevertheless understood the power and the importance of the traditions, symbols, culture, and morality of the West.

In 2006, for example, in a very controversial article, Hitchens, then one of the chief media defenders of the war in Iraq, eviscerated the notion that Iraq was anything like Vietnam. Among other things, he insisted that his abhorrence of Vietnam and support of the Vietcong sprang not from support for Communism necessarily, but from a belief that that the Vietcong represented the aspirations of a people yearning for freedom and liberty and fighting against a corrupt, repressive, and murderous, government. The same spirit, he insisted, moved him to support the Iraqi people – and their American liberators – against

Saddam and the Afghani people against the Taliban, irrespective of political ideology. And while one can (and should) certainly dispute his interpretation of events in Vietnam, there is a logic there that not only is consistent but supports the idea that liberty is among the greatest of human rights.

In his obituary for his dear friend, the writer Christopher Buckley (son of the conservative icon William F. Buckley) noted that Hitchens, despite his atheism, was not immune to the charms of religious ceremony:

When we all gathered at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, a few years later, to see W.F.B. off to the celestial choir, Christopher was present, having flown in from a speech in the American hinterland. (Alert: if you are reading this, Richard Dawkins, you may want to skip ahead to the next paragraph.) There he was in the pew, belting out Bunyan’s “He Who Would Valiant Be.”

And while this may seem trivial, it was not, as it actually suggests a great deal about Hitchens, about his understanding of the importance of Western traditions and institutions, and about the need to *believe* in concrete ideas connected to those traditions and institutions. In another story published last week after his death and written by one of his friends – this time the Evangelical preacher Larry Alex Taunton – we learn a little more about Hitchens and about his willingness, at least, to engage the debate earnestly. To wit:

I first met Christopher Hitchens at the Edinburgh International Festival. We were both there for the same event, and foremost in my mind was the sort of man I would meet. A journalist and polemicist, his reputation as a critic of religion, politics, Britain’s royal family, and, well, just about everything else was unparalleled. As an evangelical, I was certain that he would hate me.

When the expected knock came at my hotel room door, I braced for the fire-breather who surely stood on the other side of it. With trepidation, I opened it and he burst forth into my room. Wheeling on me, he began the conversation as if it was the continuance of some earlier encounter:

“The Archbishop of Canterbury has effectively endorsed the adoption of Sharia law. Can you believe that? Whatever happened to a Church of England that believed in something?” He alternated between sips of his Johnnie Walker and steady tugs on a cigarette.

My eyebrows shot up. “Believed in something? Why, Christopher, you sound nostalgic for a church that actually took the Bible seriously.” He considered me for a moment and smiled. “Indeed. Perhaps I do.”

Arriving in Washington some five months after his diagnosis, I was shocked by his appearance. Heavy doses of chemotherapy had left him emaciated, and hairless but for his eyelashes. His clothes hung off of him as though he were a boy wearing a man’s garments. He was, nonetheless, looking forward to our journey, having packed a picnic lunch and, predictably, enough Johnnie Walker for a battalion. After breakfast with his lovely wife, Carol, and his sweet daughter, Antonia, Hitch and I headed south on an eleven-hour road trip.

“Have you a copy of Saint John with you?” He asked with a smile. “If not, you know I do actually have one.” This was a reference to my challenge of two years before: a joint study of the Gospel of John. It was my assertion that he had never really read the Bible, but only cherry-picked it. “Not necessary.” I was smiling, too. “I brought mine.”

A few hours later we were wending our way through the Shenandoah Valley on a beautiful fall morning. As I drove, Hitch read aloud from the first chapter of John’s Gospel. We then discussed its meaning. No cameras, no microphones, no audience. And that always made for better conversation with Hitch. When he referenced our journey in a televised debate with David Berlinski the next day, various media representatives descended on me to ask about our “argument.” When I said that we didn’t really argue, they lost interest.

But that was the truth. It was a civilized, rational discussion. I did my best to move through the prologue verse by verse, and Christopher asked thoughtful questions. That was it.

Finally, there’s this, from Jonah Goldberg, who notes that Hitchens, despite his early and adamant Marxism, nonetheless had a rather profound affection for the traditions and classical literature of Western civilization:

I first got the idea that Hitchens might be a man of the Right after watching him on C-Span discussing the Odyssey. He was on with, among others, Jody Bottum and a left-wing female academic who (at least as far as I remember it) had little to offer other than blah-blah-blah-white-males-blah-blah (I’m paraphrasing). Hitchens had no use for the woman and really had nothing to say to her. Meanwhile, he could have a real argument with Bottum because they could at least agree that the text matters and that indictments of the heterosexual norms of the Pale Penis People were not that interesting. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that Hitch – who believed in the importance of Western Civilization (he said he’d rather defend Western Civilization than denounce John Ashcroft), gloried in the splendor of the

Canon, admired other cultures but rejected utterly the asininity of multicultural leveling – was certainly not a man of the contemporary Left, or maybe not of the Left at all.

This is important, as Goldberg conveniently points out, because Hitchens’ love of tradition and indeed of Western civilization explains explicitly why it is that the onetime leftist icon grew to become so uncomfortable with the modern political left and its “intellectuals” and why he ultimately felt the need to leave the left and forge a path of his own.

Not that it would be particularly accurate to say that this path led Hitchens to “conservatism.” He was, in the end, on neither the left nor the right as they are understood today. He was, more or less, an anomaly; a strange man out of place in the twenty-first century; an economic leftist, perhaps, but one who at least understood the importance of tradition, of culture, of history. He was part of the Remnant. When Hitchens came out in support of the American anti-Islamist efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and indeed throughout the world, the pseudo-Palestinian academic and cultural leftist Edward Said called Hitchens’ decision a “shame” and said his ideas harkened back to the nineteenth century. This latter thought may have been the most honest and most accurate that Said ever had.

The Western world is on the verge of social, political, and economic collapse, largely because its political class has lost the ability to recognize the importance of traditional values and traditional social, moral, and cultural relationships. And the one prominent leftist/mainstream journalist who understood this explicitly has now, sadly, passed from the scene. In and of itself, this would be a personal tragedy for his family and his friends and a broader tragedy for his many, many readers. Taken in conjunction with other affairs of the day, though, it may have even broader implications.

And that brings us, at long last, to Santa Claus, or at least to his skeleton. In his column this past weekend, the inimitable Mark Steyn tells the sad tale of poor

old Santa, who kinda, sorta hangs around in Loudon County, Virginia, an erstwhile conservative exurb of Washington DC:

Christmas in America is a season of time-honored traditions — the sacred performance of the annual ACLU lawsuit over the presence of an insufficiently secular “holiday” tree; the ritual provocations of the atheist displays licensed by pitifully appeasing municipalities to sit between the menorah and the giant Frosty the Snowman; the familiar strains of every hack columnist’s “war on Christmas” column rolling off the keyboard as easily as Richard Clayderman playing “Winter Wonderland” . . .

This year has been a choice year. A crucified skeleton Santa Claus was erected as part of the “holiday” display outside the Loudoun County courthouse in Virginia — because, let’s face it, nothing cheers the hearts of moppets in the Old Dominion like telling them, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus — and he’s hanging lifeless in the town square.” Alas, a week ago, some local burghers failed to get into the ecumenical spirit and decapitated him. Who are these killjoys? Christians intolerant of the First Amendment (as some have suggested)? Or perhaps a passing Saudi? Our friends in Riyadh only the other day beheaded Amina bin Salem (so to speak) Nasser for “sorcery,” and it would surely be grossly discriminatory not to have some Wahhabist holiday traditions on display in Loudoun County. (The Islamic Saudi Academy, after all, is one of the most prestigious educational institutions of neighboring Fairfax County.) Across the fruitcaked plain in California, the city of Santa Monica allocated permits for “holiday” displays at Palisades Park by means of lottery. Eighteen of the 21 slots went to atheists — for example, the slogan

“37 million Americans know a myth when they see one” over portraits of Jesus, Santa, and Satan.

Headless Santa. Awesome. And why not? What else are you gonna put up? And who else are you gonna show crucified on public property? Surely not ol’ whatshisname? Nondenominational Heaven’s no!

Of course, this isn’t just to pick on the jelly-kneed bureaucrats in Loudon County, who, after all, can’t be blamed for not wanting to get too Christ-y at Christmas. But it gets worse. And sadly, as Steyn points out, it all ties back, in a way, to Pope Benedict and the exhaustion from which he is suffering. Steyn continues:

Last year I chanced to see the e-mail exchanges between college administrators over the choice of that season’s Christmas card. I will spare their blushes, and identify the academy only as a Catholic college in New England. The thread began by asking the distribution list for “thoughts” on the proposed design. No baby, no manger, no star over Bethlehem, but a line drawing of a dove with a sprig of olive in its beak. Underneath the image was the following:

What is Christmas?

It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future. It is a fervent wish that every cup may overflow with blessings rich and eternal, and that every path may lead to peace.

--*Agnes M. Pharo*

The Agnes M. Pharo? A writer of such eminence that even the otherwise open-to-all-comers Wikipedia has no entry for her. Still, as a purveyor of vacuous pap to America’s credentialed class for all-purpose cultural cringe, she’s hard to beat. One unfortunate soul on the distribution list wandered deplorably off message and

enquired whether the text “is problematic because the answer to the question ‘What is Christmas?’ from a Catholic perspective is that it is the celebration of the birth of Christ.” Her colleague patiently responded that, not to worry, all this religious-type meaning was covered by the word “blessings.” No need to use any insufficiently inclusive language about births of Saviors and whatnot; we all get the cut of Agnes’s jib from the artfully amorphous “blessings.”

When an explicitly Catholic institution thinks that the meaning of Christmas is “tenderness for the past, vapid generalities for the present, evasive abstractions for the future,” it’s pretty much over.

Over indeed. And yet, does anyone still wonder why it is that the Pope is exhausted? If you were trying to restore Christianity to the West and this was what you had to put up with from the people who were, ostensibly, *helping* you, wouldn’t you be exhausted? We’re exhausted just thinking about it.

Look, we don’t know where the world is headed right now any better than anyone else does. But we do know that the odds that things will turn out well over the near term are pretty slim. On the one hand, the American ruling class is completely and utterly debauched. In one corner, you have a motley collection of political insiders masquerading as gatecrashers and promising to “shake up the system,” all the while ignoring the real and critical issues and promising nothing but incremental and marginal changes to that system that has made them all rich and famous. And in the other corner, we have the *real* bad guys.

On the other hand, despite the absolute pathetic state of American political leadership over the past several years, it remains rock solid by way of comparison to that of its cousins in the rest of West, who are so feckless and befuddled as to make the Americans appear grounded and sober by comparison. In a

world where the utterly mediocre Cameron and Merkel stand out as political giants, the future of the European experiment is suspect at best. Indeed, if we were betting men, we'd bet that Europe's collapse is nigh. And that America's may not be far behind.

Once upon a time, we hoped that perhaps the twin inheritances of a free and open press and a healthy religious tradition would avert the collapse – here, at least, if not in Europe as well. But now, we're not so sure. The Pope is exhausted. His successor is unknown (unlike last time). One of the last honest and adamantly pro-Western left-leaning (i.e. “mainstream”) journalists has just passed from the scene. And even Catholic colleges in this country are, apparently, afraid of their own religion.

The good news – if that's what you want to call it – is that this is precisely what the political system needs to wipe itself clean of the current, degenerate political class and begin anew. As difficult as it may be to believe, given all that precedes these next few sentences: we remain optimistic about this country and its prospects, long-term. And we remain optimistic for a handful of reasons.

First, there is no way to know at this point what form “collapse” will take. It will undoubtedly be painful for many. It will undoubtedly be noisy and disruptive. It will undoubtedly be messy and destructive, with a great many losing a great deal. But beyond that, it's hard to say. Even in “collapse,” there will be pockets of growth and productivity. Indeed, these pockets will need the collapse to emerge.

Which brings us to the second reason for cautious optimism. As we have always said, we believe that the real power to affect the country and the lives of its denizens still lies at the local level. And should the national ruling class collapse along with the

system it has erected, local authorities, institutions, and organizations will fill the void and will, in our estimation, do so more than adequately. The men and women who serve the community in local governments and civic organizations and institutions are far more likely to think of “public service” as a requirement to serve the public, rather than to enrich themselves at the public's expense, as the occupants of our current ruling class appear to believe.

Additionally, and critically, among those local and civic organizations and institutions are this nation's churches, which have a long and intimate connection with – indeed, are a foundational part of – the fundamental traditions that both fostered the original rise of Western exceptionalism and will do so again. The overwhelming majority of Americans still believe in the cultural and moral doctrines transmitted by the traditional institutions of the West, even if they don't necessarily abide the practice of religion. And the impact of a greater role for churches and other traditional civic institutions can only but help to reinforce these traditional notions and the Western ideals of liberty and self-reliance that they have always fostered.

Pope Benedict XVI is worn out, but maybe he's more exhausted than he needs to be. Sure, nothing will come easy, and his stated mission cannot succeed without much suffering, much hand-wringing, and much lesson-learning. But perhaps it will succeed nonetheless, in time.

Collapse is, as we have said, a seeming inevitability. And it likely matters not one whit whether President Mitt or President Newt or President Obama deals with a Republican Senate and a Republican House in 2013. The political culture in this country is too corrupted to be saved, we're afraid. That's the bad news, of course, but it's also the good news.

Copyright 2011. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-2696, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved.

Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.