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THEY SAID IT

To avoid therefore the evils of inconstancy and versatility, ten thousand times worse than those of obstinacy and the blindest prejudice, we have consecrated the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father's life.

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790.

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OBAMA, THE SENATE, AND THE NEW AUTHORITARIANISM.

As things stand today, the Democrats control the Senate by six seats, 53-47. Unfortunately for Harry Reid and his fellow partisans, this is a deceptively slim majority, and the GOP needs only to pick up four seats in this fall's elections to seize control and thus take unified control of Congress, presuming, of course, that the Republicans retain the House as expected.

It gets worse for Democrats. While four Senate seats is not necessarily a gimme, especially in a presidential election year and most especially if there is an incumbent running, the Democrats are nonetheless facing a monumental task. As you may recall, 2006 was a disaster for George Bush and the Republicans. The Democrats swept nearly every Senate race that was competitive. This fall, they will have to defend all of those seats under far less ideal circumstances. Of the 33 seats up in November, only 10 are held by Republicans. Moreover, of the 15 races that are considered competitive at this point, only two seats are currently held by a Republican. In short, unless conditions change considerably over the next several months, it is all but certain that the GOP will gain the four Senate seats that it needs for the majority – and likely a handful more.

For Republicans, that's the good news. The bad news is that the leaders of the party appear to believe that this is a sufficient "Plan B"; that complete control of Congress will be enough to thwart Barack Obama's ambitions, should he win re-election. Lacking control of either house, not only can he not pass legislation into law, he can't even get contentious bills into conference and hope that some sort of compromise will get him something that he wanted in return for some concession. He will be completely stymied. Or so the thinking goes.

We wouldn't bet on it. If Obama wins reelection, we'd say that there is exactly zero chance that he will sit on his hands and complain about how the mean, nasty Republicans are destroying the country. He will complain alright. But he will use the tools at his disposal to go right ahead and do whatever his little heart desires, whether he has legislative authority to do so or not.

Yes, of course, he has said that he would never do such a thing. That he *deplores* executive overreach and abuse of power. Why, he said so repeatedly when he was in the Senate and when he was running for president. And we all know that he would never do what George Bush did, right? . . . Right?

Well . . . in a way that's true. Obama doesn't see his "use" of power in the same way as Bush's "abuse" of power. They're different things in his eyes – and in the eyes of his supporters. Whereas Bush's undemocratic overreach was evil, since it was undemocratic and constituted overreach, his undemocratic overreach is good, since it's *progressive*.

In order to understand the difference between the two – and the lengths to which Obama will go in his use of executive power if he is re-elected – you must reflect upon what a progressive is and what one believes. In a piece written just over six years ago, we attempted to put into summary form an explanation of the progressive worldview. To wit:

Among the foundations of modern liberalism is the belief that "the people" cannot be trusted and that they must therefore be "shepherded" in order to do the right thing. Of course, the Founding Fathers themselves understood that plebiscitary democracy has significant flaws and that the passions of the masses must be tempered by republican institutions. But modern liberalism has an impatience and arrogance about this process that go well beyond what the Founders envisioned and serve essentially to subvert the will of people in the name of "progress."

In order to understand the pervasiveness and enduring appeal of this conception of a liberal elite dedicated to compensating for the shortcomings of democratic political discourse – a "shepherd" class, if you will – one needs to go back at least to Woodrow Wilson, who was unquestionably one of the principal architects of 20th century American liberalism. Though Wilson is best known as the inspiration for liberal foreign policy and the patron of the League of Nations, he is also the father of American Public Administration and, as such, of the notion that the "science" of administration can and should be distinct from the hazards of politics.

Wilson and his contemporaries, most notably Frank Goodnow, were reformers, who were understandably concerned about the influence of corrupting political forces (think Jacksonian "spoils" and Tammany Hall) on the emerging science of administration. They believed that they could encourage progress and establish a better society simply by insulating the day-to-day, scientifically based function of government from politics. For much of the early part of the 20th century, the politics-administration dichotomy shaped by Wilson and Goodnow, with its purportedly neutral "professional" administrative class, stood as the ideal type in "reformed" American government. Simply put, this arrangement allowed administrators/bureaucrats to make administrative policy decisions efficiently and sensibly without the interference of coarse political concerns. And this, in turn, allowed the state to exert its will without "undue" concern for the "will of the people."

The liberals (Progressives) lost the battle to insulate the bureaucracy entirely from the influence of politics . . . [but] they never gave up the dream of a decision-making elite that would be shielded from politics and would therefore be suited to advance progressive causes that might otherwise be resisted by the electorate.

For the entirety of the last three years, of course, Barack Obama has complained persistently about how uninformed and, frankly, stupid the American people are. They don't understand him. They don't understand what he is trying to do. And they keep getting in the way with their silly protests and complaints and elections and all that other garbage that just distracts him from his job. And you can bet he is not about to let some silly old democratic "branch" of government get in his way. He has important things to do. And "branches" of government and "democratic representation" are ancient superstitions of foolish men, long dead. Think we're joking? Consider the following, from the godfather of Progressivism, Wilson himself, which addresses this very issue:

The makers of our Federal Constitution read Montesquieu with true scientific enthusiasm. They were scientists in their way — the best way of their age — those fathers of the nation. Jefferson wrote of "the laws of Nature" — and then by way of afterthought — "and of Nature's God." And they constructed a government as they would have constructed an orrery — to display the laws of nature. Politics in their thought was a variety of mechanics. The Constitution was founded on the law of gravitation. The government was to exist and move by virtue of the efficacy of "checks and balances."

The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of

the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life. No living thing can have its organs offset against each other, as checks, and live. On the contrary, its life is dependent upon their quick cooperation, their ready response to the commands of instinct or intelligence, their amicable community of purpose.

Wilson, of course, considered the Constitution "political witchcraft," and is more responsible than any single individual for the notion that that document should be thought of as living and malleable. And those who carry on his aspirations all but certainly agree.

The Republicans will complain, of course. They'll stomp their feet. They'll shriek about the "imperial presidency." And they may even get a few journalists concerned. But no one on the left will care. They will know deep in their hearts that they are right, that they are doing what is best for humanity, and that anyone who dares to question them is wrong, malicious, stupid, or some combination of the three. In a recent *City Journal* titled "The New Authoritarianism," Fred Siegel and Joel Kotkin put it this way:

After the 2010 thrashing, progressives seemed uninterested in moderating their agenda. Left-wing standard bearers Katrina vanden Heuvel of *The Nation* and Robert Borosage of the Institute for Policy Studies went so far as to argue that Obama should bypass Congress whenever necessary and govern using his executive authority over the government's regulatory agencies. This autocratic agenda of enhanced executive authority has strong support with people close to White House, such as John Podesta of the Center for American Progress, a left-liberal think tank. "The U.S. Constitution and the laws of our nation grant the president significant authority

to make and implement policy,” Podesta has written. “These authorities can be used to ensure positive progress on many of the key issues facing the country.”

Podesta has proposed what amounts to a national, more ideological variant of what in Obama’s home state is known as “The Chicago Way.” Under that system, John Kass of the *Chicago Tribune* explains, “citizens, even Republicans, are expected to take what big government gives them. If the political boss suggests that you purchase some expensive wrought-iron fence to decorate your corporate headquarters, and the guy selling insurance to the wrought-iron boys is the boss’ little brother, you write the check.” But the American clerisy isn’t merely a bunch of corrupt politicians and bureaucratic lifers, and the United States isn’t one-party Chicago. The clerisy are more like an ideological vanguard, one based largely in academe and the media as well as part of the high-tech community.

Their authoritarian progressivism—at odds with the democratic, pluralistic traditions within liberalism—tends to evoke science, however contested, to justify its authority. The progressives themselves are, in Daniel Bell’s telling phrase, “the priests of the machine.” Their views are fairly uniform and can be seen in “progressive legal theory,” which displaces the seeming plain meaning of the Constitution with constructions derived from the perceived needs of a changing political environment. Belief in affirmative action, environmental justice, health-care reform, and redistribution from the middle class to the poor all find foundation there. More important still is a radical environmental agenda fervently committed to the idea that climate change has a human origin—a kind of secular notion of original sin. But these ideas are not widely shared by most people. The clerisy may see in Obama “reason incarnate,”

as George Packer of *The New Yorker* put it, but the majority of the population remains more concerned about long-term unemployment and a struggling economy than about rising sea levels or the need to maintain racial quotas.

Assuming that our predictions from two weeks ago prove correct, come this time next year, the Republicans will control the House, the Republicans will control the Senate, and Barack Obama will run the government. He will control the EPA and will instruct it to treat CO2 like a pollutant and to regulate its “production.” He will decide – as he did last week – what is in this country’s interests in terms of energy production by deferring to those who profess a scientific “gnosis” about global climate change. He will, of course, still command the health care bureaucracy and the Department of Health and Human Services. He will still have his health care law. He will still have the army of bureaucrats to implement it as he sees fit. He will still have ability to tell, for example, the Catholic Church that it cannot exercise its conscience and continue to employ people and provide them health care coverage and yet not provide them with coverage for services to which the Church objects. If he chooses to destroy Catholic hospitals, he can. If he chooses to destroy Catholic adoption agencies, he can. And that’s just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. As we said above, he will be able to do whatever the hell he damn well pleases.

More to the point, none of the “good government” types and purported government “watchdogs” will stop him, mostly because they agree with him and they think it’s long past time that someone did something about the “real problems” facing this country without the interference of the stupid people and their petty obsession with “democracy” and other anachronisms. Such is the nature of the progressive program.

As Siegel and Kotkin note, and as we have mentioned countless times before, the “Progressives” in Washington and elsewhere have a strange obsession with the Chinese Communists, whom even Obama has said he would like to change places with for a day. The Chinese Communists, you see, don’t have

to worry about the niceties of consensual rule. They do whatever is necessary to achieve their ends, irrespective of the will or the needs of the people. Far too many progressives see this as a positive, rather than a fundamental negative. And far too many, we fear, will simply cheer when Obama – freed from the worries of re-election – throws caution to the wind and governs as closely to this ideal as is possible.

An enduring theme in our work over the past couple of years has been the rather radical bifurcation of America. Americans are choosing up sides; dividing into two groups that are in direct opposition to one another and are possessed of entirely incompatible visions of the nation. Over the course of this election season, we are certain to address other aspects of this bifurcation, particularly with the publication of Charles Murray's new book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, which examines the cultural bifurcation of the nation and such election-relevant topics as the work ethic, family breakdown, and various other effects of the welfare state.

This bifurcation is also the key to understanding the likely course of a possible second Obama term. There is a faction in American political and social life that believes in the values and principles of the Founders and thinks that those values, most notably liberty, are sacrosanct. At the same time, there is a faction that believes that liberty is akin to selfishness and that the advance of quasi-scientific progress is what is most valuable in a government. That this view has been discredited and proven unworkable once already is apparently not an obstacle to the occupants of this faction. They know what is best, and are determined to see it implemented.

Winning the Senate, in short, will be nice for Republicans. But it will not be enough. If Obama is re-elected, he will continue to accumulate power in the hands of the executive.

Sadly, even if Obama is not re-elected, we suspect, given the choice of Republicans, that power will continue to accumulate in the hands of the executive anyway.

NEWT THE FIGHTER.

The general consensus about this weekend's moderately surprising primary in South Carolina is that it tells us more about Mitt Romney than it does about the day's winner, Newt Gingrich. Newt won, we are told, because Romney still hasn't sealed the proverbial deal with Republican voters. Newt is the last non-Romney standing and his victory on Saturday is intended to be a warning to ol' Willard that he still has a great deal of work to do if he wants to be the Republican nominee, much less the next President of the United States. His campaign is in shambles. His image appeals to no one – or almost no one. And he believes, apparently, that being the colorless, least offensive frontrunner is enough to win him the nomination. Among countless others, the inimitable Mark Steyn summarized the thinking thusly:

For a guy running as a chief exec applying proven private-sector solutions, his campaign looks awfully like an unreformable government bureaucracy: big, bloated, overstaffed, burning money, slow to react, and all but impossible to change.

Mitt's strategy for 2012 as for 2008 was to sit on his lead and run out the clock: Four years ago, that strategy died in New Hampshire; this time round it died one state later. Congratulations! Years ago, I was chit-chatting with Arthur Laurents, the writer of *West Side Story* and *The Way We Were* and much else, about some show that was in trouble on the road that he'd been called in to "fix." "The trouble with a bad show," he sighed, "is that you can make it better but you can never make it good." The Romney candidacy is better than it was four years ago, but it's not clear that it's good. Mitt needs to get good real fast: A real speech, real plan, real responses, and real fire in the belly. Does he have it in him?

Now, there is no question that there is some deep and powerful truth in this. As we have said all along, the idea that the GOP could even consider nominating an avowed soft-statist technocrat to challenge an avowed hard-statist technocrat in the year of the anti-technocrat is, to us, both amazing and perfectly typical. There is a reason, after all, that we expect Barack Obama to win re-election.

But there is, in our estimation, something else, something more profound and important reflected in the results of Saturday's South Carolina primary.

For starters, the South Carolina vote – coupled with the fact that Newt now leads in Florida, and the fact that he is even still in contention at all – suggests that America today is not “your father's America,” which is to say that the great battles over character that typified the Clinton presidency were won by the left. When it came to sex, infidelity, and other naughtiness, we insisted that Clinton was a symptom, not a cause of a debauched society, and that the public's willingness to tolerate his escapades proved only much of society had already entered a post-Christian era. In a February 1998 piece titled, “Waking the Sleeping Giant,” we put it this way:

Well, we believe that Bill's continued popularity, despite what were once almost universally considered “character flaws,” cannot be properly understood unless it is viewed as one of the fruits of a highly successful, 35-year-long assault on America's traditional moral and ethical standards and on its traditional customs and mores . . .

It has become accepted wisdom among the talking heads on television that Bill's situation is analogous to that of Jack Kennedy, who was also known to be promiscuous. What's the big deal, they ask? The public didn't care then and it doesn't care today. Nothing has changed.

But that is hogwash. As Father John Neuhaus pointed out in the March 1997 issue of *First Things*, “a sympathetic press hushed up John F. Kennedy's womanizing precisely because it was assumed that, were it known, it would be politically deadly.”

The fact is this nation has changed dramatically in the past 35 years. It is understandable that many of the talking heads on TV don't know this, since they are too young to remember the Kennedy years, and very few probably have little more than a smattering of knowledge of American history.

But surely Bill and Hillary know that things have changed.

And Newt knows things have changed too. When Matt Drudge broke the news Thursday morning that ABC had planned a hit on Newt featuring his *second* ex-wife, Marianne, many people were skeptical of the potential effect. As the details of the interview started to leak, though, it became more and more plausible that Newt might catch some flack. Marianne said Newt had asked for an “open marriage.” She said that Newt finally filed for divorce only months after she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, a claim made even more damaging by the portrayal of Romney as the dutiful, dedicated, devoted husband who sacrificed for his beloved wife when she was similarly diagnosed with MS. After all, we were told, this was *South Carolina*, where evangelicals still rule and where religion still matters, where, in short, character still counts.

And then the voters turned out. And they proved that all of that is nonsense. The deeply “religious” voters of South Carolina went out and voted for a twice-divorced man who is married to the woman with whom he cheated for nearly a decade while still married to wife Number Two, who says that he wanted an “open marriage” before he abandoned her, and who has suddenly “found God” now that he wants to be president.

All of which is to say that South Carolinian evangelical religious “conservatives” don’t care any more about “character” today than secular liberals cared about it during the 1990s. The left can whine and complain all it wants to about the power of the religious right and the right’s intention to impose a “Christian theocracy” on this country, but the fact of the matter is that this kind of ranting is crazier than the 9/11-truther talk. If South Carolina Republicans can go out and vote *overwhelmingly* for a third-time-married, decade-long-affair-having, open-marriage-wanting repeat philanderer, then even conservatives have accepted the left’s claims about the irrelevance of character and we are undoubtedly and fully in the age of post-Christian America.

As for what the South Carolina vote says about the Republican base and about its desires for the general election campaign, we think that much is obvious: Republican voters are looking for a fight. Sure, they’d like to win. But they’d like a fight more.

In her post-primary analysis, the ever-controversial columnist and author Ann Coulter declared that “Apparently, South Carolinians would rather have the emotional satisfaction of a snotty remark toward the president than to beat Obama in the fall.” She’s close. What they want is someone who will fight the president, who will say things that are aggressive and who will do so unashamedly. They want someone who will call him out for running a campaign based on nothing more than pap and platitudes. They want someone who will discuss something meaty and do so happily and assertively. John McCain didn’t do that to Barack Obama. Mitt Romney sure as heck won’t. But Newt will. Boy, Newt will ever.

More than just a war of words, though, apparently Republicans are looking for a fight over issues and constituencies that resonate as truly reflective of the parties’ respective cores. Two weeks ago, in our domestic policy forecast piece, we wrote that Barack Obama would run an unusual presidential campaign, one directed at his party’s base rather than at the great American “middle”:

If you want to get an idea of what the upcoming general election campaign will look like, then we suggest taking a look at two precedents. The first of these is George W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 2004. Recall that Bush, like Obama, was considered the “most vulnerable incumbent” in a generation. And many of the big shot political prognosticators said he was as good as gone and that John Kerry would be the next president. Recall as well that a big reason for this expectation was that Bush, again like Obama, had lost the support of independent voters who, as every big shot political prognosticator will tell you, decide elections. Only in Bush’s case, the independents didn’t decide. The Republican base did. And the Democratic base will decide this year.

Most people assume that such a strategy is impossible for Obama – or for any Democrat – given that the Democratic base, the self-identified “liberals” in the country, are notably less in number than the self-identified conservatives. That’s a problem, we suppose, but hardly one that’s insurmountable. The difference, you see, is that Obama’s base is more motivated – far more. To them this is more than just an election for the next president. This is life and death. It’s about life as they’ve come to know it over the last five decades and whether they will be able to preserve it. And to that end, they will do whatever they need to do.

If the primary voters of South Carolina can be believed, then this is what Republicans want as well, a campaign directed at their base, not at the soft, squishy middle. They don’t want to vote for George H. W. Bush again. Or Bob Dole. And they don’t want to vote for Mitt. They want to vote for a guy who cares

more about them than he does about the “undecided,” the “independents,” and the politically apathetic. They want a fight between right and left.

By conventional standards, it would appear to anyone paying even the slightest attention that Newt Gingrich simply cannot and will not ever be President of these here United States. He is nearly universally loathed – and that’s just within the leadership of his own party! And beyond the “friendly” confines of the GOP, the guy is all but certainly a disaster waiting to happen. Conn Carroll, a senior editorial writer at *The Washington Examiner*, sums up the damning evidence:

Unlike Mitt Romney, who occasionally beats President Obama in general election poll match ups, Newt Gingrich trails far behind President Obama in every survey. But just how bad are Gingrich’s unfavorable among the general public compared to Obama and Romney?

Not every poll releases their full results, so here are the most recent favorability results I could find for Obama, Romney, and Newt.

Fox News, 1/12-1/14:

Obama, fav/unfav, 51%/46%, +5
Romney, fav/unfav, 45%/38%, +7
Gingrich, fav/unfav, 27%/56%, -29

CBS/NYT, 1/12-1/17:

Obama, fav/unfav, 38%/45%, -7
Romney, fav/unfav, 21%/35%, -14
Gingrich, fav/unfav, 17%/49%, -32

PPP, 1/13-1/17:

Obama, app/dis, 47%/50%, -3
Romney, fav/unfav, 35%/53%, -18
Gingrich, fav/unfav, 26%/60%, -34

Americans do not love Romney, but boy do they hate Newt.

The South Carolina Republicans, obviously, have a much better impression of Newt. And so, if polls out this week can be believed, do Florida Republicans. Right now, at least, these people don’t care if independents or dissatisfied Democrats or even moderate Republicans care much for Newt. Heck, they don’t even care if they like him. They want a fight directed for them, for their priorities, and for their concerns. And they think that Newt is the guy to give it to them.

Truth be told, if a fight is what Republican voters really and truly want, then the South Carolinians did the smart thing. Newt may be a questionable conservative at times. And he is certainly anything but the “outsider” he portrays himself to be. He is probably about as flawed a “right-wing” candidate as we can imagine. But he is also, for better or worse, the *only* right-wing candidate who had the time/desire/ego/whatever to get into the race.

On occasion we will, against our better judgment, watch some of the political talk shows and catch some of what is being said about the candidates. And after the South Carolina results, we were unsurprised but annoyed to hear New Jersey Governor Chris Christie prattle on about how Newt is a jerk and an insider and has been “an embarrassment to the party.” Christie is absolutely, 100%, undeniably correct. He has Newt down. But so what? Who the hell is Chris Christie to complain? The guy had his chance to provide an alternative. And he passed. His party begged him. And he said no. He wanted to spend more time with his kids than such a campaign would allow. And then he went out on the stump for Romney and even conceded that he’d be willing to accept the Vice President slot on a Romney ticket. And yet voters are supposed to care what he says about Newt? Really? Come on, Governor. Give the voters an alternative and they’ll shut up. Short of that, what choice do they have?

We are not yet ready to change our now-only-two-week-old prediction that Mitt Romney will be the GOP nominee this year. If nothing else, we have learned over the years that Newt is a time bomb

waiting to explode, and he almost always does the most damage to himself. Maybe he'll explode again before Florida. Or after Florida but before Super Tuesday. Or maybe voters will remember with whom they're dealing and realize that the likelihood of him exploding again sometime before November is pretty high and that they just can't take the chance. Who knows?

Whatever the case, we do know that if Republican voters would rather pick a fight than win, then Newt's their guy. He has to be. As we asked just above, what choice do they have?

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