

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

Mark L. Melcher
President
melcher@shentel.net

Friday, September 20, 2002

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 16, 1994

The Love Song Of J. Alfred Clinton

Mark L. Melcher

I don't read much fiction anymore. But I still like Stephen King, largely I guess because his best selling horror stories are, for the most part, thinly veiled parodies on Congress. King is a sort of modern day Tocqueville. In fact, his book *IT*, about a demented clown who lives in the sewer and preys on innocent citizens, will one day, I think, come to be recognized as a political science classic, like Plato's *Republic*, and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*.

I guess it is my fascination with the bizarre and the incredible that makes me so enjoy watching Bill Clinton at work in the foreign policy arena. There is sort of a delicious, unpredictable, worldly innocence about him and his crowd, as they wander in the midst of almost unspeakable evil and danger.

Who could forget the memorable Clinton phrase about Bosnia: "Till those folks get tired of killing each other over there, bad things will continue to happen." Or the front page *Washington Times* story on February 8, 1994, "For the 10th time, Clinton warns Serbs."

The scene reminds me of one of those great horror movies, where these bright, clean cut, well meaning, city kids are alone at some isolated summer camp frolicking around a lake, laughing, never grasping the nature of the threat they face as they begin disappearing one by one at the hands of a crazed killer, who is smarter and more focused than they.

The locale is beautiful, but sinister music in the background constantly disturbs. Studio music: boom, da boom, da boom. "I think I hear a noise down by the lake. I'll go investigate." From the woods, boomady, boomady!

I open another beer and shudder. What fun!

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum
8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359, e-mail melcher@shentel.net

Here we have Bill Clinton, a big likable guy, clearly wanting to do the right thing, grinning all the time, bounding around Europe playing his saxophone one day and extorting his "allies" to join him in bombing the Serbs the next, all to the utter horror of his apathetic hosts.

The sun is up and Lake Geneva is beautiful. Yet sinister notes drift down from the Alps. It's not studio music in this film. It's an echo of Auden that has reverberated through the Alps since the dark days of 1939.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate.

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

With Clinton in this bucolic scene is Warren Christopher. He is a little older than the rest. He knows danger lurks. He'd like to talk it out with the killer. He has experience with this sort of thing. After all, he was Carter's top negotiator with the Ayatollah during the Iranian hostage crisis. In his book on the subject, *The Hostages In Iran*, Christopher argued that the crisis should be taken as "a clear vindication of talking as a means to resolve international disputes."

Echoing from the Alps is Auden's sonnet on diplomats, unsettling in the background.

As evening fell the day's oppression lifted;
Tall peaks came into focus; it had rained:
Across wide lawns and cultured flowers drifted
The conversation of the highly trained.

Thin gardeners watched them pass and priced their shoes;
A chauffeur waited, reading in the drive,
For them to finish their exchange of views:
It looked a picture of the way to live.

Far off, no matter what good they intended,
Two armies waited for a verbal error
With well-made implements for causing pain,

And on the issue of their charm depended
A land laid waste with all its young men slain,
Its women weeping, and its towns in terror.

Clinton's roommate from the good old days at Oxford is present too. He is Strobe Talbott, currently Ambassador-at-Large to Russia, recently nominated for the number two spot at the

State Department. He is bright, handsome, witty, well educated, and well connected. He is confident. He studied Russian poetry in college and thought Reagan was wrong when he called the U.S.S.R. an "evil empire." He is worldly too.

Two years ago in fact, he wrote approvingly in *Time Magazine* that in the next century "nationhood as we know it will be obsolete; all states will recognize a single, global authority. A phrase briefly fashionable in the mid-20th century--'citizen of the world'--will have assumed real meaning by the end of the 21st." Talbott notes that it has taken the events in "our own wondrous and terrible century to clinch the case for world government."

Disturbing strains of G. K. Chesterton can now be heard.

They have given us into the hands of the new unhappy lords,
Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.
And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs,
Their doors are shut in the evening; and they know no songs . . .

We hear men speaking for us of new laws strong and sweet,
Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in the street."

National Security Advisor Tony Lake is there also. He is very smart. Like Christopher, he has a lot of experience. He too senses danger. He has been in many tight situations. He has learned not to make mistakes. Not making mistakes is important to him because, as *The Washington Post* points out, he "has a strong sense of responsibility . . . whether he is in fact responsible or not."

At the time Clinton invited Lake to join the campaign, the *Post* said he was writing a book about "how presidential candidates, in pursuit of victory, damage themselves and the country with politically driven statements of foreign policy." Once on board, he is credited with "pressing for wiggle room in the candidate's statements." Lake's "handiwork," the *Post* says, can be seen in the careful phrasing of campaign statements on Bosnia: "We must do what we *reasonably* can," with "the greatest *possible* urgency."

In the background drifts a disturbing echo of the words of warrior poet, Roy Campbell, larger-than-life, soldier, sailor, hunter, bull-fighter, critic, translator, drinker, raconteur, scald; described by Russell Kirk as a "great brawny Carlyle-hero of a man."

You praise the firm restraint with which they write--
I'm with you there, of course:
They use the snaffle and curb all right,
But where's the bloody horse?

I would like to be able to say here, in earnest and sanctimonious tones, that the scene I describe above is different from the horror movies because this is about "real life." But I am admonished

by none other than the *New York Times* that politics today is "not about objective reality, but virtual reality."

According to an October 31, 1993, *Times Sunday Magazine* story by staff writer Michael Kelly, public relations spinmeister David Gergen is so important to the Clinton White House because what happens in the political world today "is divorced from the real world." Kelly explains that the "conversation of politics now is carried on in the vernacular of advertising. The big sell, the television sell, appears to be the only way to sell. Increasingly, and especially in Washington, how well one does on television has come to determine how well one does in life."

"Washington has become a strange and debased place," Kelly says, "the true heart of a national culture in which the distinction between reality and fantasy has been lost, a culture that has produced Oliver Stone as a historian, Joe McGinniss as a biographer, Geraldo Rivera as a journalist, Leonard Jeffries as a geneticist and Barbra Streisand as an authority on national policy."

I think this is a bit cynical. But who am I to argue with the *New York Times*? Besides, my friend Bob Feinberg says the only time he is wrong anymore is when he is not cynical enough.

In any case, whether Bill's foreign policy is realty or virtual reality, it is clear to me that one of the problems he is having is that he wants desperately for the public to provide him a script. "What do the polls show?" appears to be the question of the day in foreign policy. What do the people want me to do? What should I do? Unsettling echoes of T.S. Eliot drift down from the Alps.

And should I then presume?
And how should I begin? . . .

Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question . . .

No I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
Almost, at times, the Fool

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

The problem is that the public doesn't know what it wants. Clinton listens in vain, like the priests at the ancient Greek oracle at Dodona, looking for clues in the rustling of oak leaves and the clanging or vibrating of copper pots in the wind. The public wants (dare I say it?) leadership on foreign policy. Foreign policy cannot be formed by consensus.

Peter Drucker said this almost a half century ago, in the *Review of Politics*, 1948, Volume 10. In a remarkable article (which deserves a piece of its own some day) entitled "A Key to American Politics: Calhoun's Pluralism," Drucker argues that the American system of government, described by Calhoun as the "rule of the concurrent majority," works remarkably well when it comes to domestic policy because it allows liberally for sectional and interest compromise.

It is clear from Drucker's description of the U.S. political system that it is exceptionally well suited to Bill Clinton's brand of politics, because success depends so strongly on friendly compromise, inclusion of interest groups in the process and a minimum of ideological rigidity.

But Drucker argues that "if Calhoun's contention that the national interest will automatically be served by serving the interests of the parts is wrong anywhere, it is probably wrong in the field of foreign affairs" because "no foreign policy can be evolved by the compromise of sectional interests or economic pressures."

A foreign policy based on general principles formed around the tenet of section and interest pluralism, Drucker maintains, "will become a series of improvisations without rhyme or reason." Indeed, although Drucker doesn't say so, it might come to resemble a plot for a grade B horror movie. There are certainly enough bad guys lurking in the woods to make it interesting.

I don't know how this will all end. But as I said earlier, I find it fascinating to watch. I wrote several weeks ago in an article entitled "Trouble Ahead In Foreign Policy" that I thought Bill Clinton's personality was not ideally suited to the handling of foreign policy issues. I think Drucker's observations raise similar questions about how well his political style, stressing compromise, consensus building, and poll watching, will work in the foreign policy arena.

As I said in that prior article, I am not predicting that some horrible foreign policy disaster looms. The United States is still enormously powerful, and a foreign policy mistake or two won't bring catastrophe. For the time being, at least, we still have an awesome military to fall back on. As Fleet Admiral Ernest King said when he was recalled from official oblivion to lead the Navy in World War II, "When the shooting starts, they always send for the sons of bitches," and the United States still has the best of that breed in the world.

I think instead that we face a long period of foreign policy blunders that will have the net effect of raising the cost when someday we have to take serious action once again to rid the woods of the bad guys. For there will always be bad guys in the woods.

Unsettling echoes again fill the air, again from 1939, again from Auden, who knew about bad guys. These are echoes about evil men, men with whom it does no good to talk, who have no respect for people who are afraid to make a mistake. They're still out there you know.

Perfection of a kind was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2002. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, 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.