

The Political Forum

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

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IT'S THE CULTURE, STUPID

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I have read a seemingly endless stream of articles on the implications of Senator James Jeffords' recent defection from the GOP. I even wrote one myself last week, with considerable help from my colleague Steve Soukup. Most of these pieces were reasonably informative. But all, including Steve's and mine, made me somehow uncomfortable. And while it took a while for me to figure out why this was so, I finally realized that it was because they all shared a defect that is particularly common among people who "cover" Washington for a living.

I am speaking of the propensity to write from the viewpoint that virtually everything that happens of importance in the United States originates in Washington and then radiates outward to the rest of the world. I am also speaking of the propensity to use words such as "powerful" to describe certain members of Congress and other Washington illuminati, as though these individuals are capable of doing miraculous things strictly on their own initiative, as did Torquemada or Tamberlane.

This is not the way Washington works. Washington is not the sun around which the rest of the nation revolves. Washington is more like a brackish swamp that is constantly being altered by the daily tides that sweep in and out from the sea. Of course, the swamp affects the sea too. But this is done via the ebb tide, not the flood.

Yes, of course, powerful Washington politicians do sometimes change the course of history strictly on the power of their own convictions and initiative. But this is rare, for, as corny as it sounds, politicians do in fact draw their power from "the people," from the flood tide of humanity, so to speak.

What I am trying to say in this admittedly tortured metaphor is that while Jim Jeffords' decision to switch parties did significantly alter the outlook for day-to-day political activities in Washington, it did not shift the balance of political power in America, as many pundits maintain.

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That balance is not controlled by politicians in Washington, but by individual Americans in the villages, towns, and cities across the nation. And these people draw their ideas, prejudices, and dreams from a variety of sources, the vast majority of which originate not in the ebb tide that flows from Washington but in cultural sources far removed from the world of politics.

This is a subtle nuance, but it is one that I believe is critical to understanding everything that takes place in Washington: Jim Jeffords' defection and its aftermath; the budget, tax, education, campaign finance reform, and foreign policy battles that lie ahead; and, most important, the relationship between the American public and the bureaucratic colossus that manages the governmental Leviathan.

So, this week, I thought I would write about this model, briefly discuss the origins and nature of the cultural movement that drives politics today, and close with a brief discussion on the conditions that would be necessary to spur the kind of meaningful change in American politics that some say occurred when Jeffords jumped ship.

For starters, I would like to point out that the idea that government and government officials, elected and otherwise, initiate, direct, and control the changes that occur in American society is insidious. Over time, it instills in people a feeling that they have little control, individually or collectively, over either their government or their lives.

In addition, this mistaken notion tends to focus citizen efforts to improve society on Washington, rather than on the cultural forces that actually drive the political machine. This has had a particularly pernicious effect on the cause of political conservatism, because it has prompted some of the nation's largest conservative organizations to spend vast resources on a Quixotic quest to alter the nation's culture and politics by changing things in Washington. This ebb-tide approach can, on occasion, make a difference, but it can't effectively counter the flood tide of ideas and information that flows in the other direction.

Consider, if you will, the thoughts of my good friend Claes Ryn, who is professor of politics at Catholic University and chairman and founder of the National Humanities Institute. NHI is a nonprofit organization established upon the very idea that society's future is shaped not by politicians but by the beliefs and aspirations of its citizens, which, in turn, are a product of the moral, intellectual, and esthetical environment in which they live.

Rather than promoting a better society via change in Washington, NHI concentrates on the task of revitalizing the humanities in America's universities and colleges, where many of the ideas and attitudes that shape the nation's future are born and nurtured. For purposes of full disclosure, I should say here that I am treasurer of NHI.

Claes has written and lectured extensively on this subject over the years, but nowhere, in my opinion, has he treated it better than he did in the most recent edition of *Humanitas*, NHI's biannual academic journal. The following are excerpts from that article, which is entitled "Dimensions of Power: The Transformation of Liberalism and the Limits of 'Politics.' "

It is essential to understand that political beliefs and institutions are expressions of an underlying attitude toward human existence, that they are in a sense secondary

phenomena, having antecedents and roots in the life of the mind and the imagination.

Political elites must act within moral, intellectual and cultural parameters already in place. They can only give specific form to intuitions stirring with a people. State managers cannot autonomously produce the most profound hopes and fears of a people. New political departures, too, must have some antecedents in the intuition of a people, or they will appear far-fetched, illegitimate or extreme. An audacious initiative is not likely to succeed unless the one launching it can make use of existing potentialities of thought, imagination and desire, which, though they may not yet have been much noted, were nevertheless waiting to be mobilized. Great political leaders do creatively employ resources available to them and are sometimes able to take societies in unexpected directions, but not even such unusual persons can generate all the momentum needed to accomplish their objectives. Napoleon, for example, led his country in a new direction, but he was not himself the source of such elements of French energy and ascendancy as Jacobin nationalism and Enlightenment ideas.

Governmental elites rely for their efficacy and legitimacy upon the complicity of a great many institutions and individuals outside of government. These include the mass media, universities, schools, churches, the entertainment industry, publishing houses, and many other institutions that help shape society's mind and imagination and hence its longings and sense of reality. In institutions like these or in their vicinity are found the exceptional individuals who make others see and apprehend life as they do—novelists, thinkers, dramatists, painters, composers, preachers, screen-writers, directors, poets, et al. Over time, these non-governmental elites have great influence in shaping the thoughts, sensibilities and desires of society. These individuals wield a power that in some ways dwarfs that of politicians. People do, after all, live according to what they most deeply believe and desire. If managerial elites seem . . . firmly ensconced in government, it is not because they have independently determined the general direction of society and persuaded the people they administer to follow their lead. Their role in government became possible in the first place only because civilization had long been moving in a certain direction, giving rise to managerial thinking and making it possible for individuals of that predisposition to ascend to positions of political authority. The basic orientation of society continues to be set by all of those who are able to mold a people's fundamental sense of reality and deepest longings and fears, though the political ramifications of that influence may for a long time remain unarticulated or unspecified.

The managerial elites appear in this perspective as marionettes of sorts, at the mercy of the mind-set and the habits already forming in society at large. That underlying movement of civilization is reflected in various outlets of “the culture,” notably the mass media. The tastes and preferences that they convey are echoes, recent and simple expressions of the more daring and subtle initiatives taken long before by the most powerful minds and imaginations of an era. Society's predominant ethos is not the creature of any single group. And it evolves over decades and centuries. Yet it, not some particular political regime, decides the basic outlook, emotional tone and practical propensities of a people. The present political elites are a manifestation of a moral, intellectual and cultural evolution long in the making, the same that produced the new

liberalism. The institutions and the power of . . . the administrative state may of course be called “political,” but to do so under the influence of a narrow conception of “the political” is to note but one aspect of what they are and to risk misunderstanding their role.

This is, of course, an academic presentation. But it provides, in my opinion, a better explanation for the tremendous influence of liberalism in American politics today than standard analyses that focus on political personalities, fundraising skills, and campaign strategies.

A host of charismatic figures, along with excellent political execution, have, of course, contributed greatly to the left's political power over the years. But the origin of this power can be traced directly to the long march through the nation's cultural institutions, which began in earnest during the early part of the Great Depression, when anti-capitalism sentiment reached an astounding high.

The blueprint for this march was outlined in the early 1930s by the brilliant Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Imprisoned in the Turi by Mussolini, Gramsci recognized that the left could not succeed exclusively as a political movement, and he developed a strategy for promoting socialism by concentrating on the "ideological, moral, and cultural cements which bond a society together."

In America, Gramsci's plan worked like a charm. In fact, in my opinion, the culture *coup d'etat* by the American liberal establishment is one of the world's great political success stories. Conservatives saw it coming during the 1930s, but were powerless against the massive move to the left by the intellectual establishment, led such authors as Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, Sidney Hook, George Bernard Shaw, and, of course, Lincoln Steffens, who wisely opined, according to historian Paul Johnson, that "all roads in our day lead to Moscow."

Franklin Roosevelt is credited with developing the New Deal and selling it to Congress. But he drew the political power he needed to accomplish this task from the newly empowered cultural left, which supported and applauded his ideas and, most important, marketed them to the American public.

In the early 1950s, a few alert conservatives saw the leftist movement begin to gather another serious head of steam, taking advantage of the political quietude of the Eisenhower years. They squealed, they wrung their hands, and some of them wrote some of the finest political books ever written about the importance of traditional values and the danger of the moral decay that lies at the heart of the leftist ideology. Most prominent among these were Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, Whittaker Chambers's *Witness*, Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, and William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*.

But the cultural gates collapsed before the liberals during the turbulent days of the 1960s' antiwar movement. And neither American popular culture nor American politics has been the same since.

Whether a counterculture movement from the right could occur is anyone's guess. Some Republicans claim that it is already happening in response to the realization by much of the

public that cultural decay in America is getting out of hand, as evidenced by, among other things, the filth peddled by the mainstream of the American "entertainment" industry, by high drug use and out-of-wedlock births among America's youth, the rash of school killings, and most important, by the ethical and moral rot that permeates the Clinton administration.

Time will tell if they are right. What is certain is that if such a movement were to occur it would not originate with the nation's politicians. Jim Jeffords might be forced to switch parties again, and again, and again. But the impetus for change would, as Claes puts it, come from the nation's novelists, philosophers, religious visionaries, composers, painters, dramatists, scriptwriters, directors, poets, sculptors, architects, inventors, and educators.

These, Claes maintains, not politicians, are the kind of people who, perhaps together with unsettling historical events, could trigger a transformation of society by inspiring it with a new sense of possibilities.

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