

# The Political Forum

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

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Friday, March 6, 2005

## **A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED MARCH 24, 1999**

### **THE DAWN OF A NEW POLITICAL ERA – PART II**

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Last month, in a piece entitled “The Dawn Of A New Political Era - Part I,” I argued that both traditional American conservatism and traditional American liberalism are on the rocks. I concentrated in that article on the sad state of conservatism, noting that while a majority of Republican politicians still pay lip service to conservative themes, such as smaller government, sharply lower taxes and a reverence for traditional moral and ethical behavior, support is tepid among most, and few ever aggressively defend or promote such an agenda.

I argued that support for this view could be found, among other places, in the pathetic actions of the Senate Republicans during the impeachment proceedings, and the lack of any significant effort by the GOP majority in both houses during the budget negotiations of past four years to diminish the power and size of government.

I didn't have room in that piece to expand upon the idea that traditional American liberalism is virtually dead also. So I said I would discuss this in a later issue. I also promised that I would, at that time, speculate on what I think is replacing these two venerable old American political institutions, or as I put, paraphrasing Yeats, “What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Washington to be born.”

Once again, I find that the idea outgrew the allotted space. So I will postpone the “slouching beast” prognostication for a future issue, confining this one to a discussion of the sad state of American liberalism. So here goes.

For starters, let me say that I am aware that definitions are important to this discussion. Most Democrat politicians still consider themselves “liberals,” even though many don't publicly use the label today. But if Bill Clinton and his ardent Democratic supporters in Congress are liberals, then what, pray tell, were those old time Democrats who believed in big defense cuts, vigorous wealth redistribution, limited use of the military, abolition of the death penalty, generous welfare benefits, “human rights” as a centerpiece for foreign policy, diligent attention

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to overzealous law enforcement and to the rights of the accused, relaxed immigration policies, and strict federal enforcement of sexual harassment statutes.

As governor of Arkansas, Bill flew home to make certain that the death penalty was imposed on a black man who was so severely retarded that he didn't eat the desert at his last meal, telling the guards he would save it for later. This is liberalism?

As president, Bill takes credit for large cutbacks in welfare spending; signs legislation that virtually abolishes due process for illegal immigrants; signs the "Effective Death Penalty Act," which severely limits death row appeals; opposes international efforts to ban land mines; supports legislation authorizing "roving wire-taps;" single handedly shreds 20 years of work by the radical feminist movement; dotes on, and accepts campaign contributions from, the very same Chinese whom he once referred to as the "Butchers of Beijing;" supports large increases in defense spending; and is arguably promiscuous in his use of military power.

So far as I can tell, only two tenets are still sacred to Bill and his follow "liberals" in Congress. They are racial quotas and abortion rights, neither of which were part of the traditional liberal agenda.

Democrats still support the labor unions, as in the old liberal days, but this is pure constituency politics. No one even pretends anymore that union support has anything to do with supporting the poor working stiff against the evil capitalists. Virtually all union members today are solidly middle class, and most don't work for capitalists anyway, but, directly or indirectly, for government.

Even Bill's budgets pay little attention to traditional liberal priorities. He doesn't take from the rich and give to the poor. The "poor" get theirs, of course. But so does everyone else. The overwhelming emphasis is on middle class entitlements. It is a big city mayor's budget. Each interest group gets in line, makes its case, writes a check to the mayor's party, and awaits the results.

More military spending? Sure. Help for middle class working mothers? More police? More prisons? Midnight basketball? Of course. Anyone else? Bring your ideas to us, crackpot or otherwise. And bring your checkbook. We'll listen. You may not get as much as you want, but you'll get more from us than you'll get from the other guys. Corruption? Of course there's corruption. But like Chicago under Mayor Daley, *pere*, the country "works." The trash gets collected and the snow gets removed. So forget the corruption already.

Tax cuts are verboten not because the money would come out of the pockets of the poor, but because it would not pass through the hands of government bureaucrats, which would lessen the power of the political machine.

In a recent post-state-of-the-union stump speech, Bill discussed what should be done with the budget surplus. "We could give it all back to you, and hope you spend it right," he opined, which according to Mark Steyn of *The Spectator* magazine, drew cheers, the crowd "having assumed naturally enough that this was the applause cue." Instead, Steyn says, Clinton silenced them with the following line, "But here's the problem: if you don't spend it right, here's what's

going to happen. . . .” Spend it right? Worrying about whether middle class Americans spend their money right? That’s liberalism?

My point here is not to criticize Bill for not being a traditional liberal. As a conservative, it suits me just fine. I am simply trying to make the point that traditional American liberalism is not, any longer, the dominant force in the Democratic Party. In fact, traditional liberalism is, so far as I can tell, as rare today in Washington as traditional conservatism.

Clinton and his supporters might still call themselves liberals. And many Democratic House members might still strongly endorse lengthy liberal wish lists, as do the 50 or so socialist members of the House “Progressive Caucus” (See “Hey Republicans, Wake Up And Smell The Nuts”). But their support for Bill, through thick and thin, belies, in my opinion, their commitment to either traditional American liberalism or any brand of socialism.

To fully grasp this concept, and to lay the groundwork for a future issue discussing what lies ahead politically, I think it would be instructive to take a quick look at the roots of American liberalism.

For starters, it is important to keep in mind that the tap root of American liberalism is not lower-class rage, fomented by revolutionaries. There is, in American liberalism’s history, no Lenin, who hated the establishment for hanging his terrorist, revolutionary brother, Sasha. There is no Bakunin or Nechaev with their *Catechism of a Revolutionist*.

Even German state-socialism, which is the closest cousin of American liberalism, has very different origins. For there is in the history of American liberalism no fanatical Ferdinand Lassalle (*Staat, greif zu!*, or “State take hold of things.”), threatening Bismarck with a workers’ uprising if he doesn’t team up with Lassalle’s labor movement. Nor is there a Gustav von Schmoller advising Bismarck to quickly create social programs, not out of concern for the workers, but from fear of the Lassalleans.

American liberalism is bourgeois socialism, the kind scornfully described by Marxists as “socialism from above.” Its roots are with the early 19th century philosophers and social reformers, men like J. S. Mill and his friend Auguste Comte, and with the wacky utopians of the same period, men like Francois Marie Fourier, Etienne Cabet, and Robert Owen.

Owen disdained Marx’s “First Principle,” as stated in the opening sentence of the Rules written by Marx for the First International; namely that the “emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” Owen said that the creation of a utopian society “must and will be accomplished by the rich and powerful.”

Presaging the “big brother,” elitist socialism of future liberal American icons, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Hubert Humphrey, Owen argued that it is “a waste of time, talent and pecuniary means for the poor to contend in opposition to the rich and powerful.” The aim of his socialism, he bluntly noted, is “to govern or treat all society as the most advanced physicians govern and treat their patients in the best arranged lunatic hospitals,” with “forbearance and kindness.”

It was this attitude that prompted Tocqueville, a contemporary of Owen, to write the following warning, which still chills America's few remaining literate conservatives today.

I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and all alike incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. . . .

Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood; it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided that they think of nothing but rejoicing. For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances; what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?

Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself. The principle of equality has prepared men for these things; it has predisposed them to endure them and often to look on them as benefits.

There are, of course, instances in American history of attempts to establish the rougher form of "socialism from below," especially during several periods of labor turmoil.

The radical, socialist labor leader Eugene Debs is without question the premier American exponent of this movement. Beginning in 1890, he ran for president five times, each time on the platform of militant class struggle on behalf of the "suffering, struggling poor." Echoing Marx, Debs demanded that the workers must rise up on their own. He put it this way.

Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing you cannot do for yourselves.

Debs was a popular figure. In fact, in 1920, in his last presidential race, he received almost one million votes, even though he was at the time a resident of the federal prison in Atlanta, as a result of his strenuous opposition to Wilson's war effort.

But prosperity, the absence of significant barriers to upward mobility, and the dream, shared by most Americans of one day becoming rich themselves, or of having their children become rich, have always kept the class anger that drives "socialism from below" in check in the United States.

History's quintessential angry liberal was the sensitive, young poet, Shelley, who was outraged by the poverty he witnessed among the lower classes during the early days of England's industrial revolution and by the destruction and death that accompanied the Napoleonic wars. Shelley's poetry dripped with anger, directed not just at conventional society, but also at God, for allowing such conditions to exist. "I brought my daughter RELIGION, on earth, She smother'd Reason's babe in their birth." And much of his early prose is a prototype for later socialistic and reformist polemics. A sample follows.

Kings and ministers of state, the real authors of the calamity, sit unmolested in their cabinet, while those against whom the fury of the storm is directed, are, for the most part, persons who have been trepanned into the service, or who are dragged unwillingly from their peaceful homes into the field of battle . . . .

There is no real wealth but the labour of man. Were there mountains of gold and the valleys of silver, the world would not be one grain of corn the richer; no one comfort would be added to the human race. In consequence of our consideration for the precious metals, one man is enabled to heap to himself luxuries at the expense of the necessaries of his neighbour; a system admirably fitted to produce all the varieties of diseases and crime which never fail to characterize the two extremes of opulence and penury . . . .

English reformers exclaim against sinecures, but the true pension-list is the rent-roll of the landed proprietors: wealth is a power usurped by the few, to compel the many to labour for their benefit . . . .

The state of society in which we exist is a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilization. The narrow and unenlightened morality of the Christian religion is an aggravation of these evils.

Law pretends even to govern the indisciplineable wanderings of passion, to put fetters on the clearest deductions of reason, and, by appeals to the will, subdue the involuntary affections of our nature . . . A husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love each other. . . .

Like Shelly, most of today's American liberals have little use for traditional Christian morality. But unlike Shelly, they are unable to find much about which to be really angry. Bill is upset about kids smoking cigarettes, of course. Al Gore is currently troubled by traffic logjams in suburbia. Jane Fonda was outraged recently about the "starving children" in Georgia, until someone explained to her that there were no starving children in Georgia, which seemed to surprise her. First Lady Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton says she worries a great deal about "the children," but it has never been clear exactly what concerns her most.

Were the sensitive Shelly alive today, I think he would be astonished to learn that these solid citizens of the left wing establishment are his successors as champions of the world's downtrodden and paladins of peace.

One wonders what would stoke Shelley's humanitarian anger today. Would it be teenage smoking? Traffic problems. Threats to the abortion rights of middle class moms? Hunger in America? I don't think so. I think he would be livid over the human destruction that is caused by the nation's ten of thousands of drug dealers, who sell their poison to young people in every city, town and village in the nation, and at a liberal establishment that seems so unconcerned.

It was, of course, the depression that gave socialism the first real foothold on American soil. But even then, the model was not Debs, and his class-based anger, but the American utopians who followed in the footsteps of Owen, Fourier, and Cabet.

One was Laurence Gronlund, who doesn't even rate a line in *Cambridge Biographical Dictionary* today, but whose book *Cooperative Commonwealth* was a big hit when it was published in 1884. Gronlund was an early socialist technocrat, who called for the "Administration by the Competent." Unlike Marx, he believed that the workers were incapable of self-emancipation.

By far the most significant of this lot was Edward Bellamy, whose 1887 book *Looking Backward* was listed in several surveys in 1935, as the "most influential work written by an American in the preceding fifty years." Indeed, throughout the long Roosevelt administration, "Bellamy Clubs" dotted the American political landscape.

*Looking Backward* is a utopian fantasy about a young Bostonian, Julian West, who falls into a deep sleep in 1887 and awakens in 2000 to a world of peace and plenty, and to a nation where there is no squalor and injustice.

Bellamy's utopia is regimented and hierarchical, ruled by an elite. Most significantly, private capitalism has disappeared. Everyone is employed one big business corporation, a single capitalist, the state. The vision of the book is a perfectly organized industrial system which, by reason of the close interlocking of its wheels, works with a minimum of friction and a maximum of wealth and leisure to all.

So here we are today, nine months away from 2000, living in a thriving, capitalist society that is vastly different from the one dreamed of by Bellamy and feared by Tocqueville. Yet, to Bellamy's credit, there are signs that something resembling his all-powerful state is slouching toward Washington to be born, slowly devouring rival visions of the American political dream as it moves along.

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