

# The Political Forum

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

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### THE LEFT'S NEW BATTLE CRY: ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS, SKEPTICS, AND HUMANISTS UNITE!

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Two big political issues have dominated Washington talk recently. The first is the GOP's proposed \$792 billion, 10-year tax cut. The second is what the *Washington Post* recently described as the "struggling Gore campaign." So this week, I thought I'd offer a few comments on each.

I'll begin with the tax cut, about which I have mixed feelings. Now ordinarily, I would be very excited about such a proposition. I mean, it is nice to see the Republicans actually in the game again for the first time in several years. And what could be better than a tax cut?

But then I remember that we're dealing with Republicans here, Clinton-era Republicans at that. And frankly I think, for Clinton-era Republicans, doing nothing just might be better at this time than doing something.

How can they screw up a tax cut proposal, you ask? Well, keep in mind that the crucial period for this tax cut will come in a few months, when the negotiations with the White House begin over the details of the final package. At that time, Republicans will have to decide how much new spending they are willing to accept and how much they are willing to shave off their already-truncated tax cut in order to get Bill to sign off on the idea.

The problem, as I see it, is that Bill is far too good for these guys. He's a smart politician and he has nothing to lose. On the other hand, a substantial amount of empirical evidence indicates that the GOP leaders are a pretty stupid lot. They smell of fear too, for they have a lot to lose. And they have no apparent deep-seated convictions to bolster their resolve when they go in to confront him. So, if past is prologue, they'll go to the White House acting like Napoleons. But when Bill gets done with them, they'll come out arguing among themselves about which one is Josephine.

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I would applaud a clean tax cut with gusto. But a tax cut matched by billions of dollars of new spending, “just to be fair,” would, I think, be a disaster, especially if a big chunk of this new spending comes in the form of a grand new entitlement program, such as a prescription drug benefit under Medicare. What I have for years called “blessed gridlock” would be preferable, in my opinion, to such an outcome, since that would mean no big new spending packages and a pay-down in the federal debt, something against which no conservative could argue.

It is also worth noting here that a big tax cut, coupled with a spending package of equal size, could scare the daylights out of our friend Alan, over at the Fed, who, rumor has it, can be found on nights with a full moon in the woods, lovely, dark and deep woods, searching through goat entrails for signs of inflation. When considering this, it should be kept in mind that the chief GOP selling point for the tax cut is that it will “encourage growth.”

I hate to be bearish about a tax cut proposal. But frankly, about this one, I would echo the words of John Randolph of Roanoke, one America’s great early statesman, who once cried out in Congress, “I have found the philosopher’s stone: it is this, never without the greatest provocation, disturb a thing that is at rest.”

Having offered that pessimistic outlook, I should now say that I am quite optimistic about the GOP’s chances during next year’s presidential race. In fact, as I said last week, I think there is a strong likelihood that voters will put a Republican in the presidency next year and keep the GOP in charge of both Houses of Congress.

Now I will admit that I am not an expert on forecasting American elections. I think I used to be pretty good at it. But the older I get, the more aware I am at how enormously susceptible an increasingly undereducated public is to manipulation by the increasingly powerful liberal media. More importantly, I grow more aware each day that Americans have very different attitudes today toward certain events and circumstances than they did just a couple decades ago.

For example, try as I might, I have never really understood why Americans would tolerate a president with Bill’s ethics, morals, and out-of-control appetites. After all, the history and literature of every civilization since the beginning of recorded time is replete with stories of the dire consequences to nations whose leaders lack “character.”

Not too many years ago, the public would not, in my opinion, have condoned Bill’s behavior. To support this view, I would refer to an observation put forth by Father John Neuhaus in the March 1997 issue of *First Things*, namely that “a sympathetic press hushed up John F. Kennedy’s womanizing precisely because it was assumed that, were it known, it would be politically deadly.”

And I must admit that I was astounded last week at the public reaction to the death of John Kennedy, Jr. With all due respect to a man whom I have every reason to believe was a decent, talented, and accomplished individual, I had no idea that so many Americans would accept the notion that he was the “Prince” of “America’s Royal Political Family,” or that the nation’s “dreams came crashing down” with him. Even more amazing to me last week was the sudden high stature bequeathed to Senator Ted Kennedy by the news media, liberal political gurus, and “passers by.” Ted Kennedy? A national treasure? Has it really come to this?

Not too many years ago, the American people saved such praise for individuals who accomplished extraordinary things, displayed extraordinary talent, possessed extraordinary courage, demonstrated extraordinary moral rectitude in the face of temptation, possessed extraordinary vision, fought against extraordinary odds for a noble cause.

Sure, they loved entertainers and “beautiful people.” But they understood the difference between them and real heroes. They selected their heroes carefully because they knew instinctively that genuine heroes were crucial to the long-term health and safety of the nation, for they are the role models for future generations.

They knew what Carlyle meant when he said that “In all epochs of the world’s history, we shall find the great man to have been the indispensable savior of his epoch; --the lighting, without which the fuel never would have burnt.” They agreed with Carlyle when he said that the “the history of the world is the biography of great men.”

Jack Kennedy knew how important it was that the nation honor and admire true heroism. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Profiles in Courage*, which praised politicians who, in historically critical moments, placed conscience over political expediency. His purpose, I have never doubted, was to inspire similar responses in future generations of politicians, because he knew how important real heroes are to society and to government.

In short, it is with some humility that I forecast elections today, for I don’t claim to understand a lot of what Americans believe and revere anymore. Nevertheless, I will be immensely surprised if the celebrity-loving American people will ever learn to love Albert Gore. So I repeat, I do not think the Democrats have a prayer of keeping the White House next year, or of regaining control of either the House or the Senate, with Al at the head of the ticket.

Space doesn’t permit a comprehensive defense of this prediction this week. And there will be plenty of time in the 16 months between now the election to build the case. Instead, I would simply like to make an observation or two about Al.

This is a guy who, I believe, is more out of touch with the members of his own party than I am with the American masses. For one thing, he routinely tries to convince them that he is morally superior to Bill. The press misses the point. They make a big deal out of his disloyalty to Bill every time he does it. The real point, I believe, is that Al apparently doesn’t know that few Democrats care that the Clinton White House is morally and ethically challenged, or care whether he himself is or isn’t.

If the polls are correct, a very large percentage of Democratic voters still think Bill is great. They don’t give two hoots about Paula, Monica, Gennifer, Kathleen, Juanita, Dolly, Sweet Connie, Miss America, or any of the others. Furthermore, they don’t care much about ethical sleaze, perjury, bribery, wag-the-dog bombing raids on third-world nations, or other outrages against traditional presidential behavior.

My guess is that most of the nation’s Democrats would vote for Bill again, if he could run. Not only that, Democrats apparently still like Hillary. What else does Al need to know? Certainly he

must know that they don't like her because of her exemplary ethics. Has he not heard of, among other things, her \$100,000 cattle futures windfall?

Last May, Al gave a speech to the Salvation Army in Atlanta. He fell all over himself trying to convince the crowd that he and Tipper were deeply religious Christians. Among other things he stressed that Tipper, and by extension himself, "practices her faith and sees its power through her work." I have no reason to believe that this is not true. But I can't imagine that it matters, or that it appeals to most Democratic voters.

Here's how the famous attorney Alan Dershowitz, a prominent liberal on the political talk show circuit, sees it, writing in the summer issue of *Free Inquiry*, in a piece entitled "Taking Disbelief Out of the Closet."

The time has come for atheists, agnostics, skeptics and humanists to come out of the closet and to openly confront the religious hegemony in America that has created a political correctness so powerful that even the most courageous are afraid to violate it openly . . . Already the Democratic Party, which traditionally was more secular than the Republican, has begun to run on God's coattails.

It started with Jimmy Carter. It got worse with Bill Clinton. And it promises to get even worse with Al Gore, who is explicitly pandering to what he calls "faith-based organizations."

Now I am not implying that Dershowitz speaks for all Democrats. But there is little question in my mind that he speaks for a lot of them.

I know what Al is doing. He's courting the middle, the so-called "swing voters," trusting that his natural constituency, people on the radical left like Dershowitz, will vote for him anyway. But this strategy, in my opinion, is almost certain to backfire on him.

Political moralizing can be a very effective campaigning tool for some, very special politicians. Bill can pull it off because no one believes it anyway. People view it as part his Elmer Gantry-like charm. Following the advice of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jesuit sage, Balthasar Gracian, Bill has succeeded in transforming into "ornament" the "blemishes on his reputation," in the same way as "Caesar hid his natural defect [of baldness] with the laurel." Jimmy Carter pulled it off because his day-to-day actions demonstrated that he took his religious beliefs seriously.

In my opinion, Al can't pull it off either way. For one thing, he isn't charming like Bill. I put it this way in an article I wrote in September 1997 entitled "To Err Is Human, To Sweat Over It In Public Is Gauche." This piece was written immediately following Al's now-infamous "no controlling legal authority" press conference, at which he stammered and stuttered and looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

Like him or not, Bill is a very charming guy. More importantly, as Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner from Nebraska, once said, he is "an unusually good liar. Unusually good." Al isn't either. In fact, time and again he

has demonstrated that he becomes fidgety in a pinch. Like Nixon, he sweats, both figuratively and literally. Bill never does.

As *Washington Times* editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden, a razorback himself, points out regularly, Bill didn't grow up in Hope, Arkansas as he maintains, but in Hot Springs where, amid the bawdy houses, the professional gamblers and the organized crime syndicates, "everyone learned a scam with the multiplication tables," and where "a little sleaze" was never held against anyone. Al grew up in the sheltered atmosphere of official Washington, where his father's prominence and the elite environment of St. Albans prep school, made the development of such survival skills unnecessary.

These "shortcomings" were of no importance to Al when he was widely believed to be, as described by the *Washington Post*, "a politician of integrity and personal probity," or as *Post* sports writer and humorist Tony Kornheiser put it recently, "as clean as the agitator in a Maytag washer." But they leave him vulnerable in the rough and tumble world of Bill Clinton, where the words integrity and probity are considered nothing more than props; where the political weapons of choice are great doses of chutzpah, poise under fire, unflinching trust in the ignorance of the masses, and the ability to be "an unusually good liar."

So maybe Al doesn't have to be slick, you say. Maybe he can pull it off because he's clean like Jimmy. The problem is, he isn't. For one thing, seven years in the Clinton White House have left some serious stains on his Boy Scout uniform, including, but not limited to, the Buddhist fundraising effort and the money-calls from the White House.

But more importantly, this is a guy who has, for years, surrounded himself with shady characters. Steve and I outlined some of the evidence for this statement in a November 16, 1998 article entitled, "Al, Al, He's Their Man." I won't expand on the theme this week, except to point out that Al's campaign chairman is Tony Coelho, a guy the *Washington Post* recently described as having "left Congress under an ethical cloud." I described it at the time as having "left town just ahead of the sheriff."

In short, I think Al would be vastly better off to leave the subject of morals and ethics alone. Being clean makes little or no difference to Democrats, and he takes a chance of making things worse with the "swing voters," should they learn that it's all a big scam. My advice would be to follow the lead of Bill, and now Hillary. Answer questions about such matters with an answer to a different question.

Impudent Reporter: "Mrs. Clinton, what about your \$100,000 cattle futures windfall?"

Mrs. Clinton: "I think it is more useful and much more important to talk about the future than the past. I would prefer to talk about the things I care very deeply about, like children."

But I don't think Al will follow this advice. I think he'll continue to try to convince people that there's "no controlling legal authority" over his ethical shortcomings, and continue to antagonize

the “atheists, agnostics, skeptics and humanists” that Dershowitz is trying to organize. And I think he’ll lose.

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