

The Political Forum

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

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REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST . . . AND PRESENT

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Wow! Is this Senate trial a laugh riot, or what? For me, it's like watching a third-rate drama by a mediocre playwright, performed by a support group of egomaniacal exhibitionists on Prozac. But watch it I do. And write about it I must. For this drama, like it or not, will help determine the course of America in the next century.

As I said last week, sometime after it's over, Steve and I will try to present a comprehensive look at the entire mess. In the meantime, I thought this week that I would offer a few thoughts I have had as I have watched the proceedings drag on . . . and on . . . and on, and try to have a little fun in the process.

For starters, I should say that there is almost nothing more nauseating, in my opinion, than thinking about Proust. But what else can come to mind as one watches the leading lights of the U.S. Senate as they feed their overweening self-absorption with incessant public displays of strangely lethargic, group preening which, like most compulsive behavior, has drained them of passion and a sense of the ethical. Proustian? You decide.

Untruthfulness and dishonesty were with me, as with most people, called into being in so immediate, so contingent a fashion, and in self-defence, by some particular interest, that my mind fixed on some lofty ideal, allowed my character, in the darkness below, to set about those urgent, sordid tasks, and did not look down to observe them.

Things become very stale, very quickly, in my opinion, when Rep. Henry Hyde and the other GOP House "managers" leave the stage. They are the only players in this drama who appear, to me at least, to have warm blood in their veins.

They have been told by friends and foes alike that they are destroying their party, yet they drive on. Are they mad? Are they so consumed by hatred for Bill that they have become suicidal? Or

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could we be witnessing a strange anachronism in American politics. Could principles be in evidence here?

If so, this is worth watching. I repeat, if principles are in play here, this is worth watching, even if it means having to observe the U.S. Senate in “action.” Principles were once a powerful force in American politics. Here’s a chance to see if that is still so. If it turns out that principles no longer matter at all, it is time, I believe, to rethink the nation’s future.

There is little question in my mind that principles have less value today than they once did. Why? Because principles assume absolutes, which are a thing of the past. Contemporary American culture teaches that there is no such thing as an absolute.

Every issue today has at least two sides. As Alasdair MacIntyre put it in his wonderful book *After Virtue* (which, regular readers know, is one of the 25 books on my original “must read” list.), “This is good” has come to mean nothing more than “Hurrah for this!” Indeed, this is the premise of the popular and ubiquitous political talk shows.

If someone says that perjury is bad, “balance” demands that someone else must represent the “other side.” Bad when? What if it is “just” about sex, or to protect one’s child from unpleasantness? What if it’s in a civil case, rather than a criminal one? What if the perjurer is a charming guy who “really likes people?”

Bad? What does bad mean, anyway? Sexual harassment of women is always bad. Right? Well, not really. If the “victim” is “trailer park trash” it is not. Nor is it if the perpetrator is the President, and he “has done a lot for women?” On the other hand, the assumption of innocence for a prominent, conservative, black jurist should be pretty severely restricted. I mean, after all!

Is it okay to lie? “Tonight, to discuss this important issue, we have on our show two shallow ‘journalists;’ a totally whacked-out former White House campaign aide; a female ‘former federal prosecutor,’ who is incapable of linear reasoning, but pretty; and a famous, abut slightly loony defense attorney, who dresses up like Daniel Boone.” Say what? Is it any wonder that Americans don’t recognize “wrong” when they see it?

Is this really what we Americans want, I ask myself? A world where no ideal, no tradition, no custom, no law, no belief is taken as a given, where every point is argued. In 1943, in the midst of the darkness of World War II, C. S. Lewis wrote the following lines in an article entitled “The Poison of Subjectivism,” in a periodical entitled *Religion in Life*, which I think is worth considering while watching these popular shows, which feed on and promote the sickness of relativism.

Unless there is some objective standard of good, over-arching Germans, Japanese and ourselves alike whether any of us obey it or no, then of course the Germans are as competent to create their ideology as we are to create ours. If “good” and “better” are terms deriving their sole meaning from the ideology of each people, then of course ideologies themselves cannot be better or worse than one another. Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring. For the

same reason it is useless to compare the moral ideas of one age with those of another: progress and decadence are alike meaningless words.

Frankly, I don't think that the Republicans will suffer much if anything from their pursuit of Bill. But what if they do? What if the inquiry destroys the Republican Party? Would it have been better if Republicans had become like the Democrats to save their organization? Personally, I would rather that the GOP be a party of one individual who believes that presidents should be held to a higher standard than every other public official, than a majority party full of individuals who believe as the Senate Democrats do.

Interestingly enough, I don't think the Democrats believe the Republicans are destroying themselves either. If they really thought that prolonging the Senate trial by calling Monica et al. to testify was the equivalent of political suicide by the GOP, I don't think they would have tried so hard to stop it.

I am, however, a little worried about the possibility of another kind of negative fallout for the Republicans from the Clinton scandals. I haven't heard anyone else raise this issue before, and I could very well be wrong. In fact, I hope I am. But Republican weakness in some areas of the South in the last election set me wondering whether the nation's Evangelicals, Baptists, and others who help constitute what has become known as the "Christian Right" are in the process of retreating from politics.

What if, irony of ironies, Bill has so soiled "things political" that millions of devout Christians silently, each of his or her own volition, turn their backs on the civic matters, following Christ's admonition to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's"? This would not be unprecedented. MacIntyre notes that it happened during the epoch in which the Roman Empire declined into the Dark Ages.

A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead--often not recognizing fully what they were doing--was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.

It is worth noting when considering this question, that the Christian right as presently constituted, is a relatively new force in American politics. In fact, this group's political activism originally had little to do with national politics, but grew out of concern about changes that were taking place in local public schools that were antithetical to the values believers were trying to teach their children.

The movement gathered national steam when it joined the on-going Catholic crusade against abortion. But it is, and always has been, a tentative venture for many of its members, who, as Christians, are less concerned with the things of this world than with preparing themselves for the next one.

I am not predicting here that the Christian right is going to “go away.” I am simply wondering out loud if the movement might be in danger of losing some of its political potency, as one by one, devout Christians begin turning off “the news,” both actually and figuratively, so their families won’t be exposed to the ethical and moral squalor that is the hallmark of the Clinton presidency.

The polls, of course, show that a great many Americans see nothing very much wrong with Bill’s conduct. And a clear majority, in the Senate as well, think that, even if he has done everything of which he has been accused, he’s still good enough to be president of the United States.

This should not surprise anyone who has kept up with the changes in America since the 1960s. In fact, the surprising thing to me is how many Americans still apparently believe that such things as adultery, perjury, obstruction of justice, sexual harassment, abuse of power, and attempted character assassination are “bad,” given the nihilism that permeates popular culture today.

A lot of liberals get really excited about Bill’s continued “popularity.” They think it is terrific. Their side is “winning.” As a practical matter, I think they should be careful about calling on the gods of public opinion, for they can quickly turn on their beseechers. In *Table Talk*, Coleridge notes the “woeful case of the conjuror, who, with infinite zeal and pains, called up the devils to do something for him.”

They came at the word, thronging about him, grinning, and howling, and dancing, and whisking their long tails in diabolic glee; but when they asked him what he wanted of them, the poor wretch, frightened out of his wits, could only stammer forth,--'I pray you, my friends, be gone down again!' At which the devils, with one voice, replied,--

“Yes! yes! We'll go down! We'll go down!
But we'll take you with us to swim or to drown!”

If this warning is too abstract for Bill’s supporters, I would refer them to a recent column by John Leo, in which he pointed out that a majority of Americans also favor the death penalty, believe that racial preferences and partial birth abortion should be banned, and that flag burning should be criminalized.

As for me, I believe that any nation that is governed by individuals who rely heavily on the polls to determine policy will quickly find itself in deep trouble. History demonstrates that while some individuals may be well informed and naturally wise, “the masses” often are not a reliable guidepost for action.

This is, I think, especially true in this age when the giant propaganda “news” machines are so extraordinarily efficient at manipulating popular opinion, and so easily manipulated themselves by unscrupulous politicians, due to their corporate ownership. Russell Kirk put it this way.

That the "ordinary citizen" does not automatically distinguish false propaganda for what it is, ought to be evident to anyone who knows the course of events in modern Germany or Italy--or, for that matter, the United States . . . The march of events between the two

World Wars convinced thinking men that it is quite possible (and, under certain conditions, probable) that falsehood, rather than truth, may triumph popularly in the market-place of ideas. Nations with a literacy almost complete and a long tradition of self-government were brought to ruin by clever propaganda.

This is not say that polls are unimportant. In an ideal world, however, they should not, in my opinion, be used by politicians to determine policy, but to monitor society's health. If the polls reveal growing racial or class tensions, for example, politicians should not play on these, but should take steps to ameliorate the circumstances that are causing the problem.

In the present case, if a majority of the American public is unaware of the historic link between dishonest leaders and the loss of liberty, then it is the duty of politicians to educate the public to this fact, not to take political advantage of it.

Hundreds of political books and tracts, by some of history's most brilliant political theorists, have addressed the delicate problem, particularly in democracies, of paying adequate attention to the wisdom of "the people," while avoiding being influenced by the ignorance of the "the mob."

The very best, in my opinion, is Ortega y Gasset's classic work, *The Revolt of the Masses* (another of the "Top 25). While this wonderful volume was written almost 70 years ago, it is remarkably fresh today in its discussion of the impact on democratic politics of the "masses," which Ortega y Gasset is careful to note are not restricted to any class, but represent instead the historically ignorant and morally rootless of every stratum of society.

But I think I will, this week, offer some thoughts on the subject from another great writer, James Fenimore Cooper, who is widely known for his novels, but who also wrote remarkable political essays, which can be found in his book called *The American Democrat*.

A central theme in Cooper's work is a fierce defense of personal liberty, most especially when threatened by mass opinion, and even more especially when that threat is couched in what we would today describe as "politically correctness." The following lines don't do justice to the wealth of politic insight contained in Cooper's works. But they do, I believe, highlight the problem of poll worship, and demonstrate that the dangers involved are not new.

In this country, in which political authority is the possession of the body that wields opinion . . . there is a strong and dangerous disposition to defer to the publick, in opposition to truth and justice. This is a penalty that is paid for liberty, and it depends on the very natural principle of flattering power. In a monarchy, adulation is paid to the prince; in a democracy to the people, or the publick. Neither hears the truth, as often as is wholesome, and both suffer for the want of the corrective. The man who resists the tyranny of a monarch, is often sustained by the voices of those around him; but he who opposes the innovations of the publick in a democracy, not only finds himself struggling with power, but with his own neighbors. It follows that the oppression of the publick is of the worst description, and all real lovers of liberty should take special heed not to be accessories to wrongs so hard to be borne. As between the publick and individuals, therefore, the true bias of a democrat, so far as there is any doubt of the true merits of the controversy, is to take sides with the latter. This is opposed to the popular notion,

which is to fancy the man who maintains his rights against the popular will, an aristocrat, but it is none the less true; the popular will, in cases that affect popular pleasure, being quite as likely to be wrong, as an individual will, in cases that affect an individual interest . . .

The people being sovereign, require the same flattery, the same humoring of their wishes, and the same sacrifices of truths, as a prince . . .

In America, it is indispensable that every well-wisher of true liberty should understand that acts of tyranny can only proceed from the publick. The publick, then, is to be watched, in this country, as, in other countries kings and aristocrats are to be watched. . .

To supplant the exactions of the laws, therefore, by those of an unauthorized public, is to establish restraints without the formalities and precision of legal requirements. It is putting the prejudices, provincialisms, ignorance and passions of a neighborhood in the place of statutes; or, it is establishing a power equally without general principles, and without responsibility.

More next week, as the “trial of century” goes on . . . and on . . . and on.

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