

The Political Forum

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

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LIBERALISM: RIP

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I was in Dublin on the day that the Berlin Wall fell. I watched the action on CNN late into the night in my hotel room. Like everyone else, I had known for a long time that it was coming. But it was still enormously exciting. It was one of those events that the great historian Daniel Boorstin described in his book *Hidden History* as “fertile verges,” “places of encounter between something and something else . . . between kinds of landscape or seascape, between stages of civilization, between ways of thought and ways of life.”

The remarkable thing was that everyone knew when it was occurring that this was a “fertile verge,” a momentous turning point in world history. This is rare. In most instances, the full import of an historic event isn't recognized until years later.

Certainly no one knew on the 12th of October 1492, when Columbus and his 120 sailors descried land in the “New World” that the old world would never be the same. Most Frenchmen knew that the storming of the Bastille was a big deal when it happened on July 14, 1789. But no one could have known as they watched or heard about it that it would set off a chain of events that would shake Europe to its core and permanently change the course of Western political thought.

More often than not, great historical change occurs so gradually that no single event can be cited as marking the end of one era and the beginning of another. One day, we wake up and realize that a series of discoveries and human actions have joined forces to make the world a remarkably different place than it was just a few years earlier.

I got to thinking about this last Wednesday while I was reading an article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled, “Democrats' Plans' to Sit on the Projected Surplus Deeply Divides Liberals Outside, Inside Congress.”

This clumsy, grammatically incorrect headline bothered me, and as I noodled over how I would have written it, I realized that the real story that the writer, Christopher Georges, was telling was

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much simpler and more profound than his headline indicated. The headline should have been read, I decided, “Liberalism: RIP.”

Georges’ opening paragraph was, I believe, well written. It read: “Even for Washington it’s a strange turn of events: Democrats are suddenly appearing to be the fiscally conservative guardians of the ballooning projected surplus.” But it could have been better, in my opinion. It could have read: “Sometime during the Clinton presidency, classic American liberalism rolled over and died.”

According to Georges, “dozens of left-leaning groups” are demanding that Democrats in Congress “lead the charge” against Bill’s insistence that any budget surplus be applied to “fixing” Social Security and not be spent on existing or new government programs.

Among the “left leaning” groups cited by Georges was something called the “Food Research and Action Center,” which was described as a “leading anti-hunger organization.” The president of this outfit is James Weill (what do you suppose he does all day?), who Georges quoted as follows. “Now is the time. We have all these unmet human needs; we have a surplus; we should use it.”

Cecilia Munoz, a senior official at the National Council of La Raza, an “Hispanic rights” organization, was quoted as saying, “There is a sense of alarm about the choices that are being made.”

My favorite, was a quote from one Gerald McEntee, president of AFSCME, a union for government employees, who put forth this apparent non sequitur: “There are a lot of people who worked hard to produce this surplus. We believe it should be used for social programs.”

Yet. Yet. According to Georges, Congressional Democrats are resisting; and not just any Congressional Democrats. Among those against spending the money, according to Georges, are such high profile liberals as Barney Frank (Mass.) and Chakah Fattah (Pa.). You simply don’t get any more liberal than these guys.

Fattah summed up their position this way. “Sure, people in my district want to spend the money on social programs, but of all the issues that can be used against us, the biggest is a lack of fiscal responsibility. Look, I’m a very liberal member of Congress, but I agree with the president.”

Pardon me? Fiscal responsibility is the biggest issue that can be used against Democrats? Really? Well, glory hallelujah, brothers and sisters!

Georges doesn’t maintain that these guys wouldn’t like to spend the money. He says they have suddenly become “fiscally responsible” because, of all things, a “desire for re-election.” He explains it all in the following manner, which I quote at length because I believe these observations are to American politics what the Berlin Wall coming down was to the world.

The result: Democrats can sell themselves, especially to the all important middle-income swing voters, as the party of fiscal sobriety. That’s key even for liberals who represent predominantly urban areas, as many of these districts now include growing

numbers of suburban swing voters . . . And it is the middle-income and upper-income voters who, more than their urban counterparts, have become the key battleground for votes . . .

“To regain the House, all Democrats have to pay more attention to the middle than the left,” says political analyst Stuart Rothenberg. “The whole spectrum has moved to the center.” For Democrats, especially Mr. Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, the pull from the left to spend more on social programs while attempting to shed the “tax and spend” image is a balancing act *not likely to disappear any time soon* (emphasis added), as they seek to convince swing voters that the party is not beholden to its traditional base.

But a subtler, though equally significant, trend guides Hill Democrats’ willingness to shrug off the liberal core: Poor Americans are voting less and less. And liberal Democrats, indeed Democrats as a whole, are wearying of performing for voters who don’t show up on election day. Between the midterm elections of 1990 and 1994 turnout among voters with incomes under \$9,600 dropped to 22% from 32%, according to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate; and for those making between \$9,600 and \$14,399, turnout slipped to 32% from 36%.

Meanwhile, turnout rates for middle-income voters, with incomes between \$36,000 and \$47,000, jumped to 58% in 1994 from 50% in 1990. For those making more than \$48,000, turnout rose to 63% from 57%.

Elected liberals now realize that those suburban swing voters are crucial to holding off Republicans. “Democrats are playing to where the votes are,” says Curtis Gans, who heads the electorate study committee. “Is meeting their needs necessary for winning seats? Probably not,” he says, referring to the low-turnout, low-income population.

The crucial point here is not, as Georges seems to think, that “the poor” are not voting in high numbers. In reality, there aren’t enough genuinely “poor” people around anymore to make much difference. The real point is that “suburban swing voters” are rejecting the liberal line in high enough numbers to frighten the liberalism out of the likes of Frank and Fattah.

This is a very big deal. Indeed, it is a catastrophe for liberalism because, as any elections expert will tell you, and as Frank and Fattah certainly know, year in and year out it is the “suburban swing voters” who decide most elections in this nation.

As with the fall of the Berlin wall, I have known for a long time that this was coming. In fact, I first began commenting on it in a December 1993 “Fearless Forecast piece” entitled “Bullish On The Good Ol’ U.S. of A.--With Caveats.”

I wrote this piece 11 months before the Republicans took control of both houses of Congress, and just a few months after Bill and the Democratic House and Senate passed the largest tax increase in history, along with the Family Leave Act and a costly “national service” act.

It was also immediately after Bill successfully crushed a grass-roots Congressional effort to trim \$100 billion off the deficit, and at a time when First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's national health insurance scheme was widely believed to be on the road to passage.

But the decay was setting in, and it was apparent to anyone who was paying attention. I put it this way.

The fly in Clinton's ointment, as I see it, is that the public really doesn't want the stuff he and Congress are doing. What we are seeing is a liberal congress and a liberal president madly pursuing an agenda filled with items that a majority of the public either opposes directly or thinks is unimportant.

The best evidence of this can be seen in Clinton's chronically low popularity ratings. Absent some sort of extraordinary event, such as the civil war, the great depression, the Vietnam War or Watergate, it is unprecedented for a president to be as low in the polls as Clinton is for such a long period of time. Furthermore, public distaste for congress is so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Thus, I am very optimistic that the liberal Democratic juggernaut that has gripped Congress for so many decades will be relegated to the dustbin of history by a surprisingly strong Republican victory in both the House and the Senate.

I may be too optimistic about this, but I like to think that the burst of new spending programs and new taxes enacted this year and certain to be enacted next year, in the face of clear and growing public distrust of and distaste for government, and even clearer evidence that the nation cannot afford such folly, will mark the end of 1960's style liberalism in the United States.

As Ortega y Gasset noted in 1930, "the last flare, the longest; the last sigh, the deepest. On the very eve of their disappearance there is an intensification of frontiers . . ."

Within the next 12 months, the GOP took control of Congress and the public roundly rejected First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's national health insurance plan. Bill took the hint and began to argue that he was not and never had been a liberal. He said he was a "new Democrat," and started talking about balanced budgets and welfare reform. His polls went up and have stayed up. Mrs. Clinton made no such switch. Her polls went down and have stayed down.

The handwriting was on the wall. But it wasn't until last week, when I read the above-mentioned *Wall Street Journal* article, that I realized that the "juggernaut" of "1960s style liberalism" really had been "relegated to the dustbin of history," as I predicted it would in late 1993. Why? Because, as I said in that piece, the public "really doesn't want the stuff" liberals have been foisting on them all these years. Bill saw it coming 1994. Barney and Chakah are seeing it now.

The big question is, of course, whether this attitude on the part of the nation's swing voters is permanent. According to Georges, Brookings Institution budget expert Robert Reischauer thinks

it is. Should the Democrats retake the House, Reischauer maintains, “any shift in position would be at the margins.”

I agree. Part of what we are witnessing here, I think, is baby boomer concern over wasteful government spending at a time when they are just beginning to become concerned about their retirement prospects. But I also think it’s deeper than that. I think evidence abounds that the public is not only disenchanted with the liberal “tax and spend” fiscal policies, but with much of the entire liberal agenda.

Last week, for example, the earth shook under one of the most important liberal constituencies, the teachers’ unions, when the Wisconsin State Supreme Court upheld as constitutional a Milwaukee program that would use state funded vouchers to pay the parochial-school tuition of some 15,000 low income children.

One of the interesting things about this development is that the movement was sparked by Wisconsin state representative Molly Williams, a former welfare mother and a former state campaign chairman for Jesse Jackson. And it was hailed by African-Americans across the nation, who polls suggest support school choice by a hefty 57%, for it is their kids who have suffered most from the stranglehold that the teachers’ unions have on education in America.

What is really going on here, I believe, is that the secular liberal value system is crumbling. In retrospect, it is apparent, I believe, that this was inevitable.

By aggressively promoting the idea that truth is relative, and that moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of preference, liberals systematically undermined support for their own cause. For absent a transcendental imperative, concern for anyone, or anything beyond one’s immediate interests, becomes a matter of choice. And it was just a matter of time before the choices began to drift away from the liberal line. After all, shouldn’t everyone “do their own thing?”

Supporting big government redistribution programs is First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton’s “thing.” She defines herself as a passionately caring person who wishes to use the power of government to, as she once put it, advance her “burning desire to make the world around me--kind of going out in concentric circles--better for everybody.” That’s her “thing.” But that doesn’t mean it must be anyone else’s “thing.” What if I want shopping to be my “thing?”

Old time liberals, like Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and Hubert Humphrey maintained that liberalism was not just compatible with traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs, but was actually a logic extension of such values. They had no qualms about claiming that God was on their side.

Modern day liberals occasionally try to make this connection also. But their heart isn’t in it. Since the 1960s, liberalism has become aggressively secular. Conventional moral and ethical values are viewed as “intolerant,” “judgmental.”

An alternative value system needed to be developed. And it was. The heart of this system is a variety of “ists” and “phobes.” Character, under this system, isn’t measured by a person’s actions, but by how he or she feels about things.

The centerpiece of this system is a series of epitaphs such as “racist,” “sexist,” “chauvinist,” and “homophobe.” Traditional “no nos,” such as perjury, adultery, dishonesty, theft and even boorish behavior toward a member of the opposite sex are not *ipso facto* wrong. Under this system, it depends on the politics of who is doing it.

This system is enforced by something I once described as “one of the most powerful political weapons ever devised by man, namely the terrible swift sword of political correctness.” This enormously powerful tool is modeled on Marxist propaganda dogma. So far as I know, it was first described by Orwell in his great novel *1984*. He called it “Newspeak,” and described it as means by which the state progressively narrowed the range of ideas and independent thought.

But day-by-day, the blade on this sword is becoming duller in the United States. Stunning evidence of this came just last week, when the public charge by a leading New York liberal, The Reverend Calvin Butts, that New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is a “racist” met with deafening silence, even among most of the city’s leading blacks.

There was a time when such a charge by a leading liberal would have been, in the words of the *New York Post*, “a show-stopper.” But as the *Post* put it, “No more.” The big gun was fired, and this time is fizzled. Instead, what occurred was a public discussion over whether Giuliani’s proposal to change the admission requirements at the City University of New York was in the bests interests of the community. And, once again, the earth trembled under liberalism.

Where it all leads is a story for another issue. For now, I would just say that I think that the Democratic Party is going to have to find a new agenda, or continue to lose ground. Liberalism, and all the baggage that goes with it, won’t get it anymore. Even Barney and Chakah have figured this out.

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