

# The Political Forum

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

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### THE STATE OF POLITICS

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Like most Americans and virtually all Republicans, we enjoyed President Bush's State of the Union speech last Tuesday night. We didn't think it was his best-ever performance. We believe that his presentation at the National Cathedral on September 14 was the finest presidential speech since 1987 when the Great Communicator, President Ronald Reagan, told Mr. Gorbachev to "tear down this wall." But Tuesday's speech was, in our opinion, a fine effort nevertheless.

We also enjoyed the television commentary the next day.

We were particularly interested in seeing how Democratic politicians and pundits would handle the delicate task of criticizing a highly popular president. In our opinion, they didn't do it well, which came as no surprise. The Republicans never figured out how to do it effectively during the Clinton years, and, it seems to us, that Bill was an easier target than "W" is today.

Our advice to Democrats would be to relax, at least for now; recognize that President Bush and they share the same basic goals, and be pleased, along with a majority of Americans, that he seems to be doing a reasonable job pursuing these goals. Take a page from Richard II, when he was trying to rationalize the reality that Bolingbroke was going to be king. "If he serve God, We'll serve Him too, and be his fellow so."

One thing that occurred to us while listening to and reading the commentary and analysis on the speech was how little anyone in the chattering class seemed to care about the politics of the speech. The vast majority concentrated their observations on either the delivery or the tone of the speech. It was (or wasn't, depending on the pundit) a well-delivered, well-metered, inspiring speech. And while most liked it, others didn't, but largely because the "performance" was subpar.

Conservative commentators, in turn, focused on the domestic policy aspects of the speech. From them we heard about the good (private Social Security accounts), the bad (federalizing larger

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chunks of the education system), and the ugly (embracing a new federal entitlement to prescription drugs) in the President's domestic agenda.

But few observers from either political persuasion mentioned what the smart Democrats in the audience certainly perceived, namely, that the speech was extremely political.

It was no coincidence, for example, that three of the four terrorist organizations that President Bush mentioned by name ( Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad) are engaged in campaigns against Israel. From a geopolitical standpoint, Bush's statement was a warning to friends and enemies alike that his administration will have little tolerance for those who continue to draw distinctions between terrorists based solely on the nationality of their targets. But it was also a reaffirmation of unequivocal support for the Israeli position, which plays directly to the politically important American Jewish community, which traditionally has been a bedrock Democratic constituency.

Later in his speech, Bush reaffirmed his determination to fight terrorism wherever it exists, and although his statement didn't seem political on the surface, it played directly to polling data suggesting that his forceful handling of the "war against terrorism" is largely responsible for his historically high performance ratings. "Some governments," he declared, "will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will."

This statement, incidentally, demonstrates that Bush's personal convictions and his political aims are of the same tenor. It jibes nicely with information revealed in a remarkably informative recent *Washington Post* series on the actions of various principals in the Bush administration in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In the January 31st segment of that series, the President is quoted as saying during a meeting with his top policy advisers just four days after the attack that he doesn't want other countries dictating terms or conditions for the war on terrorism. "At some point," he reportedly said, "we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America."

The authors of the series, Bob Woodward and Dan Balz, noted that Colin Powell didn't think at the time that such an approach was "realistic." Vice President Dick Cheney, in contrast, "took the President at his word, and was convinced the president was absolutely serious when he said they would go it alone if necessary."

On the domestic front, Bush was also subtly, but nevertheless effectively, political, appearing to have studied the work of his predecessor, Master Politician Bill Clinton. As we mentioned earlier, any conservatives spent their time decrying the speech's embrace of a "big government" agenda, failing to grasp, we think, the finely honed political genius in the words Bush uttered.

On the one hand, the President actually moved to the left of the Democrats, calling for government action on a host of nontraditional Republican fronts. One of these was a proposal to increase minority homeownership, a nice political touch given the inroads that the President appears to be making into the black and Hispanic communities, which are two other constituencies of the Democratic Party's bedrock

On the other hand, despite his expressed policy concerns, he forced Democrats to debate the

large, high-profile domestic issues on Republican turf. In his response, House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (D-MO) was reduced to making the argument that tax cuts are unsound "because they lead to budget deficits," hardly the kind of class warfare rhetoric that has formed the foundation of his party's opposition to tax cuts for over 20 years. This, we argue, was a truly remarkable political gambit by Bush, the likes of which we haven't seen since Bill Clinton unfurled a litany of proposed federal programs only minutes after declaring "the era of big government" over.

It was also, we add, a very important, maneuver. Because of Bush's skill in steering the political debate, on taxes, spending, the budget, and virtually all other macroeconomic issues, the Democrats have been forced to abandon decades old positions, essentially conceding the basic supply-side argument.

Consider, if you will, what Gephardt told Tim Russert on the Sunday before the speech on Meet the Press. "Tim," he said, "one thing you've got to remember is that the only way you're going to get the budget straightened out is the way we did in the '90s, and that is to make the economy work. The purpose of tax cuts is not just to have a tax cut for a particular time, it is to get the economy to grow. If you can get the economy to grow, you will start having more money coming into the government, and it's a synergistic, positive process that moves both the budget forward and the economy forward. "

As OpinionJournal.com's James Taranto noted, "The only thing Gephardt forgets to say is that we need to cut marginal rates."

Now, with most modern presidents, a discussion of the political subtext of the domestic and foreign policy components of the speech would be sufficient, but not so with George W. Bush. His first State of the Union, like all his speeches, had an additional component, one that was overtly religious. And while we don't suggest that the President's routine use of religious images and references to God are politically motivated (in fact, we think they are quite the opposite), it is nevertheless true that they carry a very strong political message. On Tuesday night, for example, he repeatedly used the term "evil" in a transcendent context, and at one point noted that, "Even in tragedy, especially in tragedy, God is near."

Among other things, this language has a direct appeal to a wide range of American voters, including, but not limited to, large segments of the black and Hispanic communities.

Whether intended or not, this is also a direct challenge to the growing effort by radical, but increasingly mainstream, elements within the liberal establishment to ban religion from the public square and to question whether people with strong religious beliefs are fit to hold public office.

In a previous piece, we called this phenomenon *fidesphobia*, derived (by us) from the Latin word for faith, *fides*, and defined (again by us) as the irrational fear of people who believe in God. It is a relatively new phobia for Democrats, and for any large group of Americans, for that matter. But it has been in full bloom within the far left establishment for at least a couple decades, and has quietly become so accepted by the mainstream leftist establishment that people like Ted Turner are perfectly comfortable describing Christianity as a "religion for losers," and the

*Washington Post* can generalize in print about conservative Christians being generally "poor, uneducated and easily led."

*Fidesphobia* took an interesting twist during the campaign when Joseph Lieberman's fellow liberals began to question whether his regular references to his faith might not be threatening to their agenda. The Anti-Defamation League became so distressed by it all that they publicly warned Lieberman of their belief that "there is a point at which an emphasis on religion in a political campaign becomes inappropriate and even unsettling in a religiously diverse society such as ours."

But this fear of the God-fearing reached a new level of intensity during Attorney General John Ashcroft's confirmation hearings, when various liberal groups began publicly to question whether his Christian faith would interfere with his ability and willingness to enforce the laws of this nation. And no Democrat, to our knowledge at least, took offense at such a declaration.

As we said earlier, this phenomenon is of fairly recent origin. It was clearly not apparent during the 1960s, when religious leaders and their flocks, from all persuasions, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, were in the forefront of both the civil rights and the antiwar movements. In fact, I think a good case could be made that the civil rights campaign was first and foremost a religious action, as was the abolitionist movement before it. Nor was devout religiosity a problem for Democrats in the 1970s, given their support for Jimmy Carter, whose self-proclaimed deep devotion to his religious beliefs were, to my recollection at least, never an issue.

But *fidesphobia* is definitely alive and well within the Democratic establishment today. And while most political pundits don't mention it, President Bush's repeated public affirmations of his faith are potentially extremely damaging to the Democratic party's influence on some segments of its largest constituency groups, who are beginning to look favorably on a president who speaks their language of faith, even though he is a Republican. It will, we think, become increasingly difficult for opponents of George W. Bush to demonize him in front of these communities when it is he, not they, who shares their spirituality.

We have written repeatedly about the dilemmas posed to Democrats by George W. Bush. This is a point being echoed even by liberal commentators who just now are beginning to understand why, despite their dramatic 1994 "revolution," Republicans always seemed to get their lunches handed to them by Bill Clinton. In a January 30th piece, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote, "The Democrats are faced with the simple fact that most Americans like their president, and are rooting for him." And while there are those who will quibble over the delivery or policy content of the speech the President delivered last week, the political subtext only served to reinforce what it is these Americans like about George W. Bush, domestically, internationally, and spiritually.

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