

The Political Forum

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

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ONE CHEER FOR AND A FAREWELL TO BILL

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For what it's worth, I think Bill did the right thing last week when he bombed the Afghan terrorist training camps and the chemical plant in Sudan. As I said last week, radical Islamists declared war on the United States a long time ago, and a response is overdue. So one cheer for Bill, says I.

Before giving the other two cheers, I will await the answer to a couple questions. The first is whether this effort signals a meaningful hardening of Clinton administration policy toward terrorists and their supporters. The second is whether this effort was part of a well-designed, long-term tactical plan.

Frankly, I am concerned that I'm not going to like the answers to these questions. I am concerned that last week's raids were sparked by a temper tantrum over the bombings of American embassies in Africa, coupled with a desire to divert public attention from Bill's growing legal problems.

As a result, I am concerned that the Clinton crowd isn't serious about their newly declared "war" on terrorism. I am concerned that they will quickly tire of the effort, or sue for peace when the going gets tough, which it will. If this happens, the United States will be in a peck of trouble.

I am also concerned that this raid wasn't part of any plan; that the raid was the plan; that the White House foreign affairs gurus, Madeleine, "Sandy" and the gang, are sitting around today contemplating a series of questions like, "What do we do if they blow up a commercial airliner?" "What do we do if they blow up another embassy?" "What do we do if they hit one of our cities with chemicals or biologicals, or with a series of suicide bombings?"

If they don't know the answer to these questions, indeed if they hadn't already formulated responses when they launched last week's attacks, then I strongly believe that the early stages of this war will not go well for the United States.

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My concerns on these points are based on a number of observations. For starters, as I said last week, I believe the evidence shows that administration policy has been marked, from the day Bill came into office, by extreme timidity toward America's self proclaimed enemies, the militant Islamists and those nations that support them, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Lebanon.

I think this attitude stems from a number of factors, including the life-long dovishness of virtually every senior member of the Clinton team; a growing ambivalence toward Israel; a growing friendship with Arab-American political groups, some with ties to radical Islamic elements; and the lack of anyone in a position of authority in the administration who understands the nature of the threat and is in a position to present realistic options for confronting it. Time will tell.

As for the question of whether Bill has a plan, I must confess that it would seem odd to me that a well-designed, long-term tactical scheme to fight international, militant Islamic terrorism would begin with air strikes.

Every terrorism expert with whom I have discussed this issue believes that air strikes against nations that are suspected of supporting terrorism cannot be the centerpiece of a long-term tactical plan to wage war against terrorism. Such strikes are generally quite popular politically. And they do raise public awareness, which can be a good thing. But they are of little long term, practical use in fighting terrorism. There must be more.

If there isn't more, it would be a little like me walking into the Mt. Jackson Moose Lodge one night and smacking Scott Sager upside the head. Now Scott is a big guy, and people watching would say of me, "That boy either has a hell of a plan, or he's pretty stupid." I just hope Bill has a hell of a plan, because if he doesn't he's likely to look pretty stupid. Osama bin Laden, you see, is a big guy. And more importantly, *he* has a plan.

It is important to understand when considering this issue that last week's air strikes were easy, both militarily and politically. No American troops were put in harm's way, and neither Afghanistan nor Sudan are powerful enough militarily to present a serious threat to U.S. interests or to those of its allies. Nor is either of any significant economic or political importance.

This would not be the case with similar attacks against nations such as Iran, Iraq and Syria. Each of these has a serious military, armed with missiles and other advanced weaponry that could threaten American allies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and of course, Israel. Each also has important friends around the world who have business interests in their countries. And many of these friends are also friends of the United States.

In short, a direct military attack, such as was launched against Sudan and Afghanistan, on Iraq, Iran or Syria, or even against terrorist training camps run by Hizballah in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, could be quite costly and very dangerous to America's worldwide interests.

So what to do? As I said last week in an article entitled “Some Thoughts On Terrorism,” if the United States is serious about this war, “new tactics will have to be developed and refined, and some old ones will have to be taken out of storage.”

The first step in this process will have to be, as I said, to lower the threshold for determining whether a nation is complicit in a terrorist act against U.S. interests. It appears that Bill may already have figured this out, and I applaud him for that.

The second will have to be to develop a capability to engage in highly aggressive covert actions against the military, social, economic and political infrastructures of those enemy nations that are not good candidates for direct military actions. The United States doesn't have this capability now, and it will take years to develop it.

Such attacks would place a real price on anti-American activities. A few cruise missiles would be a blessing compared to the economic and social problems that could result from an aggressive covert operation in this age when even the most backward of nations is deeply dependent on such modern conveniences as electricity and advanced communications. Such an assault would also allow target nations to quietly stop their support for international terrorism with no loss of face.

So what's with Bill's air strikes last week? What kind of anti-terrorist plan begins with air strikes and speeches? As I said earlier, I'm a little nervous that Bill doesn't know what he's doing, a little nervous that he might have done it for reasons that aren't related to anti-terrorism strategy. I guess we'll find out whether these concerns are warranted when the other side responds, and we see what Team Clinton has up its sleeve.

In the meantime, Bill gets one cheer from me. When dealing with murdering fanatics, I believe that almost anything is better than nothing, regardless of efficacy or motive. Last week was a start. And that is, I think, a good thing.

Now, aside from Bill's air strikes, the question I have been asked most often by clients since Bill gave his *mea minimus culpa* speech last week is whether I think he will be able to serve out his term.

This is a difficult question because so little is known publicly about what Independent Counsel Ken Starr has learned in his four-year inquiry. But the question has been asked, so I will answer it. I think Bill has had it. I think he will not complete his term. I think it's good-bye Bill sometime next year.

Now I am aware that I am betting against the best damage control politician since the dissolute and debauched Mark Antony withstood Cicero's 14 scathing and now famous philippics, for which Cicero paid with his life. The details of these presentations are, of course, of no relevance to the present issue, but I thought a few words from the second philippic, one of Tullius' greatest presentations, might be of interest anyway.

However, if the hope of being praised cannot entice you to behave decently, is fear equally incapable of scaring you out of your repulsive behavior? I know the law courts cause you no alarm. If that is due to innocence, you are to be commended. But if the

reason is your reliance upon force [read corruption], do you not understand this: that the man whose imperviousness to judicial process is due to such a cause has pressing reason to feel terrors of quite another kind? For if you are not afraid of brave men and good Romans—seeing that armed satellites [read spin control artists] keep them away from your person—believe me, your own supporters will not stand you for very much longer. . . . When men could not endure Caesar [read Nixon], will they endure you? . . . Antony: some time, at long last, think of your country. Think of the people from whom you come—not the people with whom you associate.

Anyway, I know that I am betting against the best, when I bet against Bill. In fact, regular readers will remember that I humbly acknowledged this in a recent piece entitled "Waking The Sleeping Giant." I put it this way.

I must say, watching him handle scandal is like watching a great athlete perform. He has it all. His tactical skills are flawless. His understanding of the American public is phenomenal. And the loyalty he educes from his family and close associates is something to behold. More importantly, it appears that he has completely conquered shame, in much the same way that great athletes conquer pain.

Regarding this last point, and to stay with the sports metaphor for a moment longer, I think it is interesting to note that all truly great athletes make enormous personal sacrifices for their sport. And this leads me to wonder what horrible sacrifices Bill Clinton must have made, both spiritually and practically, in order to be able to stand so proudly before the American public under such circumstances.

Nevertheless, I think he's had it. He's started making mistakes. He appears to be letting anger cloud his judgment. The *Washington Post* last Sunday quoted a "former administration official" as saying that his team is "tired, burned out and frustrated." And Starr has neutered most of them anyway, by forcing them outside the information loop.

These guys, who once set new records for successful spin on an almost hourly basis, have been reduced to the role of public posturing, often in the dark as to the facts behind their assertions. Now it's four against the world: Bill, Bill's lawyer David Kendall, Bill's old friend Mickey Kantor, and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Regarding Ms. Clinton, one thinks of Auden's "Shorts:"

When he is well
 She gives him hell,
 But she's a brick
 When he is sick.

To make matters worse, the liberal media is no longer a rubber stamp for the Clinton spin. I must confess that I didn't expect this. But one by one the big name liberal pundits are either jumping ship or hiding in the hold. This has to be worrisome to White House spin artists, who have anchored their strategy on the belief that the liberal media controls public opinion. More and more now, the White House will have to go direct to the public. And that's difficult,

especially since Bill can no longer hold press conferences without being asked embarrassing questions.

Furthermore, many of Bill's fellow Democrats are starting to twitch a little. Anyone who watches the "talking head" politic shows can't help but notice that the producers are having trouble finding credible people to take Bill's side. More and more they are relying on wackos like radical feminist Patricia Ireland and Clinton friend James Carville. What, one wonders, ever happened to first term Illinois Senator Dick Durbin, who use to turn up on such shows all the time proclaiming Bill's innocence. I keep expecting to see his face on a "missing" ad on a milk carton.

I can't say exactly how the end will come. But I remember very clearly, shortly after coming into this business in 1973, explaining to clients that, despite Richard Nixon's numerous public pleas to "put Watergate behind us" for the "good of the country," it wouldn't happen, because there was no mechanism for accomplishing such a task.

The same is true today. Yes, Bill and possibly a majority of the public and of both political parties would like for the matter to be dropped and for us all to "get on with our national life," as Bill put it. But the fact remains that there isn't a single person or group of persons that could make this happen. Like a great river, Bill's legal problems must follow a certain course, and while this course can be adjusted and altered along the way, it can't be stopped.

Ken Starr must complete his report. And he will present it to Congress. Bet on it. There is simply no way that Americans are going to "get on" with their lives without this happening.

Like it or not, Congress will acknowledge and act on this report. There is simply no way that a coalition of members, no matter how large, could succeed in getting Congress to set it aside, to ignore it. That isn't going to happen. The report will be handed over to the House Judiciary Committee for "consideration." That's a fact. Indeed, this eventuality is so certain that both parties have hired staff to deal with it. It will happen. The river begins in northern Minnesota and it flows by Burlington and Keokuk on its way to New Orleans. That's the way it goes.

The Judiciary committee, chaired by Rep. Henry Hyde (Ill.), who is described in the 1998 volume of the highly regarded Almanac of American Politics as "one of the most respected and intellectually honest members of the House," will hold hearings on the report. That too is a done deal. There is considerable speculation over when this will happen. But no one doubts that it will happen.

Republicans expect the report to be presented to Congress sometime next month. Democrats will demand that it be mothballed until after the November elections. For obvious reasons, most Republicans don't want to do this. Most Republicans, like most politicians these days, aren't too smart. But they are smart enough to know that if the Democrats desperately want them to do something for political reasons, then it is probably isn't in their best political interests to do it.

My guess is that Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (Ga.) will tell Hyde to get started immediately after receiving the report. Full-blown public hearings will, of course, not open until early next year, when the new Congress convenes. There simply isn't time between now and the

November elections. But I wouldn't be surprised if the contents of the summary of the Starr report were made available before the election, possibly via a public reading of the document before Hyde's committee.

Gingrich will say that he is doing this because he is afraid that the contents of the report would be leaked if he tried to keep them under wraps until January. Leaks, he will say, would be more unfair than releasing the report itself. He will also argue that the public deserves to have some awareness of what's in the report before voting in November.

In any case, public hearings will be held on the Starr report. Count on it. And during these hearings, there is no question in my mind that at least one Republican will introduce a resolution calling for the impeachment of Bill Clinton. And this resolution will be voted upon. Once again, count on it.

Then it's stand up time for the Democrats. They then will be, to repeat part of a quote that I used in a piece last February from Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*, "face to face with the margin of mystery where all our calculations collapse, where the stream of time dwindles into the sands of eternity, where the formula fails in the test tube, where chaos and old night hold sway and we hear the laughter in the ether dream."

In short, they will have to step up to the mike and say whether they think Bill Clinton is fit to serve as President of the United States. There won't be any more, "Let's wait till all the facts are in." For the first time, Democrats will have to take a stand for or against Bill with the evidence on the table in front of them.

Several weeks ago, I said I thought that they would stand by their man. I no longer do. I think they'll flinch. I think some will stare at the ceiling and hope no one notices them, others will excuse themselves to "attend to urgent matters." But some will, I believe, vote against Bill, and *voila*, suddenly it's a "bipartisan" action. And the snowball will begin rolling down the hill.

Conventional wisdom holds that the Republicans don't want to throw Bill out because they don't want to run against President Al Gore in 2000. I once thought this was true. I no longer do. I think that when the time comes to vote on Bill's future, the Republican thumbs will be down.

Collectively, they may not like it. But what individual Republican will stand up and defend him? Furthermore, if Attorney General Reno names an independent counsel to investigate Democratic campaign law violations, which is increasingly likely, Al could well be damaged goods himself by the late winter of 2000, when the Iowa caucuses open.

In the final analysis, of course, everything will depend on what's in the Starr report. My guess is that it will be outline behavior that is even more sordid and disgusting, ethically, legally and morally, than what we've heard to date. Once again Auden's "Shorts" come to mind.

Pick a quarrel, go to war,
Leave the hero in the bar;
Hunt the lion, climb the peak;
No one guesses you are weak.

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