

The Political Forum

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

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EDMUND BURKE SHINES IN THE AGE OF THE EDITORIAL

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Last Friday, March 23, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story detailing the Clinton administration's dependency on polling data. According to the *Journal*, the White House spent just short of \$2 million in 1993 alone for public relations polls. This compares with \$216,000 that former President George Bush spent on similar polls in two years, 1989 and 1990.

"More than any other president, Mr. Clinton, the first baby boomer president, relies on polls and focus groups in helping to determine what he needs to be saying and how he should be saying it," the *Journal* said.

I was initially reminded by this story of the old Churchill quote that went something like, "it is hard to look up to a leader who has his ear to the ground." Then I remembered that Burke had something to say about leadership versus followership. I looked it up and sure enough he did. Quite a bit, actually.

The problem is that looking something up that Burke said is a little like trying to eat one Cheeto (I love Cheetos.) I read into the night and not surprisingly, before I finished, I had found many things which Burke said that are remarkably relevant today, over 200 years after the great statesman made them.

These are tumultuous times. The public is assaulted daily with a plethora of highly complex political and social issues, any one of which could have enormous impact on their lives. Financial markets reel from one issue to the next. Editorial writers and media pundits attempt to make sense of it all for a fickle and often confused public. If the 1960s were the Age of Aquarius, the 1990s are the age of the editorial.

So this week, I thought I'd offer a little Burke, as food for thought on the issues of the day. Burke was a very special politician in his time. He had conviction, wisdom and courage. As such, he would be peerless today. Even Dr. Johnson, who disapproved of Burke's politics, said

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of Burke that he "is such a man, that, if you met him for the first time in the street where you were stopped by a drove of oxen, and you and he stepped aside to take shelter but for a few minutes, he'd talk to you in such a manner, that, when you parted, you would say, 'This is an extraordinary man.'"

In my opinion, no editorial writer or pundit living can rival Burke's wisdom on current events. So put aside your *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New Republic* and *National Review*. Put aside your Bartley, Buckley, Safire, Kinsley and Broder. If you want truly learned opinions on today's events, listen to Burke.

For starters, here's what Burke has to say about the *Wall Street Journal* piece on Clinton's dependence on polls.

But when the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents, in the construction of the state, will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments not the guides of the people. Moderation will be stigmatized as the virtue of cowards; and compromise as the prudence of traitors; until, in hopes of preserving the credit which may enable him to temper and moderate on some occasions, the popular leader is obliged to become active in propagating doctrines, and establishing powers, that will afterwards defeat any sober purpose at which he ultimately might have aimed.

When we know that the opinions of even the greatest multitudes are the standard of rectitude, I shall think myself obliged to make those opinions the masters of my conscience . . . no man carries further than I do the policy of making government pleasing to the people . . . I would bear, I would even myself play my part in, any innocent buffooneries, to divert them. But I never will act the tyrant for their amusement."

Regarding Clinton's propensity to change his mind over matters he himself has described as "moral issues," Burke says this.

You obligingly lament that you are not to have me for your advocate; but if I had been capable of acting as an advocate in opposition to a plan so perfectly consonant to my known principles and to the opinions I had publicly declared on a hundred occasions, I should only disgrace myself without supporting with the smallest degree of credit or effect the cause you wished me to undertake. I should have lost the only thing which can make such abilities as mine of any use to the world now or hereafter: I mean that authority which is derived from an opinion that a member speaks the language of truth and sincerity, and that he is not ready to take up or lay down a great political system for the convenience of an hour, that he is in Parliament to support his opinion of the public good, and does not form his opinion in order to get into Parliament, or to continue in it.

Burke is also interested in the excuse offered recently by Clinton fan, *Newsweek's* Eleanor Cliff, that the Whitewater affair was simply "the way things are done in Arkansas." Here's what Burke says about that.

These gentlemen have formed a plan of geographical morality, by which the duties of men, in public and in private situations, are not to be governed by their relation to the Great Governor of the Universe, or by their relation to mankind, but by climates, degrees of longitude, parallels, not of life, but of latitudes; as if, when you have crossed the equinoctial, all the virtues die, as they say some insects die when they cross the line . . .

This geographical morality we do protest against . . . we think it necessary, in justification of ourselves, to declare that the laws of morality are the same everywhere, and that there is no action which would pass for an act of extortion, of peculation, of bribery, and of oppression in England, that is not an act of extortion, of peculation, of bribery, and oppression in Europe, Asia, Africa, and all the world over.

Relative to Hillary Rodham's health care plan, and the price controls it endorses, Burke says this.

The objection here is, as we observed, by no means on account of the imperfection of the law; it is on account of its erroneous principle; for if this be fundamentally wrong, the more perfect the law is made, the worse it becomes . . . where the principle is faulty, the erroneous part of the law is the beneficial, and justice only finds refuge in those holes and corners which had escaped the sagacity and inquisition of the legislator.

What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics."

The producer should be permitted, and even expected, to look to all possible profit which without fraud or violence he can make; to turn plenty or scarcity to the best advantage he can; to keep back or to bring forward his commodities at his pleasure; to account to no one for his stock or for his gain. On any other terms he is the slave of the consumer; and that he should be so is of no benefit to the consumer. No slave was ever so beneficial to the master as a freeman that deals with him on an equal footing by convention, formed on the rules and principles of contending interests and compromised advantages. The consumer, if he were suffered, would in the end always be the dupe of his own tyranny and injustice.

On Clinton's plan to expand the influence of government, Burke feels this way.

To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government. It would be vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. The people maintain them, and not they the people. It is in the power of government to prevent much evil; it can do very little positive good in this, or perhaps in anything else.

But the clearest line of distinction which I could draw . . . was this: that the state ought to confine itself to what regards the state or creatures of the state: namely, the exterior establishment of its religion; its magistracy; its revenue; its military force by sea and land; the corporations that owe their existence to its fiat; in a word, to everything that is

truly and properly public,--to the public peace, to the public safety, to the public prosperity.

Concerning Clinton's ambivalence about U.S. involvement in Bosnia, Burke says the following.

By the law of nations, when any country is divided, the other powers are free to take which side they please . . . It depends wholly on this, whether it be a *bona fide* charity to a party, and a prudent precaution with regard to yourself, or whether, under the pretence of aiding one of the parties in a nation, you act in such a manner as to aggravate its calamities and accomplish its final destruction. In truth, it is not the interfering or keeping aloof, but iniquitous intermeddling, or treacherous inaction, which is praised or blamed by the decision of an equitable judge.

Here's what Burke thinks of Clinton's plan to raise taxes on the rich in order to give more to the poor.

In a fair distribution among a vast multitude none can have much. That class of dependent pensioners called the rich is so extremely small, that, if all their throats were cut, and a distribution made of all they consume in a year, it would not give a bit of bread and cheese for one night's supper to those who labor, and who in reality feed both the pensioners and themselves.

But the throats of the rich ought not to be cut, nor their magazines plundered; because, in their persons, they are trustees for those who labor, and their hoards are the banking-houses of these latter. Whether they mean it or not, they do, in effect, execute their trust,--some with more, some with less fidelity and judgment. But on the whole, the duty is performed, and everything returns, deducting some very trifling commission and discount, to the place from whence it arose.

A perfect equality will, indeed, be produced,--that is to say, equal want, equal wretchedness, equal beggary, and, on the part of the partitioners, a woeful, helpless, and desperate disappointment. Such is the event of all compulsory equalizations. They pull down what is above; they never raise what is below; and they depress high and low together beneath the level of what was originally the lowest.

This, of course, brings up Burke's view of Clinton's "minority rights" activities. About this, Burke says the following.

When, indeed, the smallest rights of the poorest people in the kingdom are in question, I would set my face against any act of pride and power countenanced by the highest that are in it; and if it should come to the last extremity, and to a contest of blood,--God forbid! God forbid!--my part is taken: I would take my fate with the poor and low and feeble.

But if these people came to turn their liberty into a cloak for maliciousness, and to seek a privilege of exemption, not from power, but from the rules of morality and virtuous

discipline, then I would join my hand to make them feel the force which a few united in a good cause have over a multitude of the profligate and ferocious.

As for the rather scruffy lot of friends and associates with whom Bill and Hillary ran when he was governor of Arkansas, Burke takes a philosophical, one might say fatalistic, position.

Kings are naturally lovers of low company. They are so elevated above all the rest of mankind that they must look upon all their subjects as on a level. They are rather apt to hate than to love their nobility, on account of the occasional resistance to their will which will be made by their virtue, their petulance, or their pride. It must, indeed, be admitted that many of the nobility are as perfectly willing to act the part of flatterers, tale-bearers, parasites, pimps, and buffoons, as any of the lowest and vilest of mankind can possibly be. But they are not properly qualified for this object of their ambition. The want of a regular education, and early habits, and some lurking remains of their dignity, will never permit them to become a match for an Italian eunuch, a mountebank, fiddler, a player, or any regular practitioner of that tribe. The Roman emperors, almost from the beginning, threw themselves into such hands; and the mischief increased every day till the decline and final ruin of the empire.

Here's what Burke says about Clinton's exuberance for "change."

Men who undertake considerable things, even in a regular way, ought to give us ground to presume ability. But the physician of the state, who, not satisfied with the cure of distempers, undertakes to regenerate constitutions, ought to show uncommon powers. Some very unusual appearance of wisdom ought to display themselves on the face of the designs of those who appeal to no practice and who copy after no model. Has any such been manifested?

I wished to warn the people against the greatest of all evils,-- a blind and furious spirit of innovation, under the name of reform. . . I hoped to see the surest of all reforms, perhaps the only sure reform,--the ceasing to do ill. . . . Novelty is not the only source of zeal. Why should not a Maccabaeus and his brethren arise to assert the honor of the ancient law and to defend the temple of their forefather with as ardent a spirit as can inspire any innovator to destroy the monuments of the piety and the glory of ancient ages?

Burke's view of Clinton's involvement in Whitewater is simple, if a bit obtuse.

It is very rare indeed for men to be wrong in their feelings concerning public misconduct; as rare to be right in their speculation upon the cause of it.

And what does Burke propose now?

I would persuade a resistance both to the corruption and to the reformation that prevails. It will not be the weaker, but much the stronger, for combating both together. A victory over real corruptions would enable us to battle the spurious and pretended reformations.

As is always the case with Burke, neither I, nor anyone living today, could have said it better.

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