

# The Political Forum

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

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Mark L. Melcher  
President  
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

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### **CULTURE, NOT ECONOMICS, LIES AT HEART OF DEMO DEFEAT**

**Mark L. Melcher**

Since the November 8 election, I have read and heard countless explanations for "what happened" on that fateful day. Many observers attributed the results to anger at big government, at Democrats, at Bill Clinton, at incumbents, or at all of the above. Clinton himself said he thought the voters were reflecting anger at the slow pace of "change."

I think they are all correct. The election was indeed about "big government," "bad government," "bad politicians," "high taxes" and "gridlock." But in my opinion, at the heart of this anger was distress among middle class Americans about what Democratic Party policies are doing to the nation's culture, its customs and traditions. After all, not a single Republican incumbent lost.

As a rule, the average working American is stoic about what he or she considers to be objectionable government actions. Most shrug their shoulders at the latest outrage and go on to work. But eventually they get "fed up." When, in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, "the pool-pah exceeds the power of humans to comment," Americans do in fact comment. That, in a nutshell is what I think happened on November 8.

It wasn't one thing. It wasn't the same thing for every person. Every individual has his or her own flash point.

o It might have been the fact that a brother-in-law didn't get a well deserved promotion at the fire department for no other reason than because he is white and male.

o It might have been that a neighbor was arrested and threatened with a long prison term for filling in a bog on the north 40.

o It might have been reading about a child molester who was released from prison by some liberal judge or governor, only to molest another child a few days later.

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8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842

Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,  
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- o It might have been the omission of an opening prayer at a graduation exercise, or the absence of the traditional crèche in the town square, because of the "liberals in Washington."
- o It might have been federal funding for midnight basketball.
- o It might have been the Smithsonian Institution's attempt at a politically correct rewrite of the history of World War II.
- o It might have been the idea that Hillary Rodham Clinton wanted to make it illegal for an individual to pay a doctor for care above and beyond the government's determination as to what was "adequate."
- o It might have been reports of Joycelyn Elders' "condom tree" in her federal office and her callous statement that pro-lifers have to end their "love affair with the fetus."
- o It might have been all or any combination of these or other similar actions embraced by Democrats that finally led millions of Americans earlier this month to say "enough already." \*

In short, I think the election reflected, more than anything, the cumulative impact of a variety of assaults over a very long period of time, all emanating from Democratic policies, on the cultural sensitivities of ordinary citizens everywhere. Furthermore, I think the political wars that lie ahead will have more to do with this clash of cultural attitudes than with any of the issues that today occupy the pundit community, such as tax cuts, Social Security, line item veto and balanced budgets.

Economics may provide the battlefield for the principal political fights of the next decade, but the war will be fought over culture. Indeed, if one is to fully understand the give and take in Washington in the next decade, and thus to attempt to forecast the direction of society in the 21st century, it will be mandatory to appreciate the differences in cultural beliefs and attitudes between the liberal establishment and the incoming GOP leadership. These differences, which involve the fundamental beliefs upon which American society was built, are vast.

I couldn't begin to address this topic in any depth in this publication. But I thought I would offer, as sort of an introductory course, a look at several documents that are part of the left's effort to nationalize the public school curriculum. Nowhere, in my opinion, can one find a clearer presentation of the liberal side in the upcoming cultural war, than in these outlines of what these folks would like taught to America's school children.

Keep in mind when reading what follows that studies show that just 5% of seventeen-year-old high school students can read well enough to understand and use information found in technical materials, literary essays, and historical documents. Only 7% are able to infer relationships and draw conclusions from detailed scientific knowledge. Some 60% of eleventh-graders do not know why *The Federalist Papers* were written; three-quarters cannot say when Lincoln was president; one in five knows what "Reconstruction" was about. Most high-school students cannot explain what a "government budget deficit" is; two-thirds do not know what "profits" mean. Barely 6% of them can solve multi-step math problems and use basic algebra.

I will first explore the liberal recommendations for addressing this crisis that are contained in "Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies." This 178-page politically correct volume, places heavy emphasis on teaching cultural diversity and community activism, and preparing students for impending environmental disasters. It recommends that teachers help students "construct a global perspective that includes knowledge, skills, and commitments needed to live wisely in a world that possesses limited resources and that is characterized by cultural diversity."

It also notes that "democratic societies are characterized by hard choices," and offers as an example of a particularly "hard choice:" "Should I vacation in a state that has just passed a law of which I disapprove?" This in a nation where teenage sexual activity results in some one million pregnancies annually, 406,000 abortions, 134,000 miscarriages, 490,000 live births, and some three million cases of sexually transmitted disease.

One searches in vain through the "culture" sections of this social studies volume for evidence that the authors understand that a society cannot long endure without a foundation of common beliefs and historic experiences about which every citizen can be proud; that it might be a good idea to concentrate teaching time on the roots of American culture, which is the glue that ultimately binds society in times of crisis and is a principle factor in limiting violence between and among classes and races.

In fact, there is no mention that the nation's children might be taught that the United States resulted from one of the most extraordinary and noble experiments in government in the history of the world; that, in the words of John Neuhaus, Washington and Adams, among others, "were publicly insistent that this experiment in republican governance could not have been created and cannot be sustained except by a vibrant popular belief in moral principles supported by religion and public virtue;" that the goals and beliefs established by our forefathers in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are not part of the culture or the laws of the majority of other societies around the world.

This is a huge report, and space does not permit a comprehensive look at it. But the following examples of proposed classroom activities provide the flavor.

O "A unit within the world culture section of Sara Vertinen's seventh grade core class involves setting up a World Bank . . . some students, as bank officials, interview other students who represent selected nations in the developing world who are applying for loans to build infrastructure . . . Following the interviews, the World Bank 'officials' gather together to decide which countries will receive loans and why . . . [Among other things, Vertinen will] assess their ability to compare and evaluate alternative land uses in particular nations."

No mention is made of teaching these potential little world-government advocates about the importance of free markets and entrepreneurial skills in nation building, or of the dismal record of success that international redistribution of wealth schemes have generally compiled.

O "Tip Jimenez . . . wants students to recognize the United States' economic interdependence with other nations, but also wants them to consider the larger question of whether this

interdependence ever leads to worker exploitation, how exploitation might be defined, and what the relationship is between exploitation and human rights. To set the stage, he shares the lyrics of a song by the social and political activist group 'Sweet Honey in the Rock' . . . this song attempts to have listeners raise questions regarding their own complicity as consumers in the exploitation of workers and resources. Ending with the question, 'Are my hands clean?' the song addresses how our wants and needs are often met at the expense of others."

Pop music morality, which teaches the lesson that trade is exploitative, advocated by persons who think a moment of silent prayer in schools is a violation of the separation of church and state? It makes one wonder who "educated" these people.

O "In a number of units in her world history course, Glory Ann Fitzpatrick has found that her students become quite agitated by incidents in which rights have been violated. Thus, for a week, Fitzpatrick focuses on the topic of universal human rights by having students reflect on the incidents they have noted and then, in small groups, develop a list of rights they believe all human beings should have, regardless of where they live or their ethnicity, gender, or religion . . . She then distributes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and has them, working in small groups, compare their work with the United Nations . . . As a follow-up, Fitzpatrick has students hypothesize about which human rights would be the easiest and most difficult to guarantee in the United States for all residents."

There is no indication here that it might be well to instruct these students about the enormous effort it took to guarantee basic political rights in the United States, before having them blithely create new ones, like kids writing a Christmas list. This exercise is reminiscent of Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun's declaration in a speech before the National Urban League last summer that one of the "fundamental rights" that exists in America is "freedom from insult."

There is also no mention of the simple, but important doctrine, that rights come with responsibilities, or of the idea that new "rights" inevitably threaten more traditional ones. Liberal reactionarianism has indeed come a long way from the days when Jeremy Bentham, an icon of the movement, observed that "for every right which the law confers on one party, whether that party be an individual, a subordinate class of individuals, or the public, it thereby imposes on some other party a duty or obligation."

We now come to a 272-page volume entitled: "Geography for Life, National Geography Standards." Given the fact that studies reveal that fewer than half of high school pupils in the United States can locate New York on a blank map, and only one in four can find Massachusetts, one would think that this 272-page proposal for a national geography curriculum would concentrate on teaching kids where they are spatially. Not so. We find that this prosaic view of geography has given way to geography-as-a-vehicle-for-teaching-anti-growth-environmentalism-and-community-activism. The following quotes, which are scattered throughout the document, is, I think, instructive of what these folks feel should be at the heart of modern day geography instruction.

O "List the advantages and disadvantages of recycling and reusing different types of materials . . . write a poem that focuses on ways to conserve natural resources . . . Develop a plan to conserve a local resource, such as water or wildlife . . . Describe some human-induced changes that are

taking place in different parts of the United States and speculate on their future impacts (e.g., development and conservation issues in terms of the wetland of coastal New Jersey) . . . Propose and discuss alternative solutions to an environmental problem and the likely consequences of each solution, and then decide on the best solutions (e.g., the best way to recycle plastic milk cartons in the local community) . . . Assess how variations in technology and perspectives affect human modification of landscapes over time and from place to place (e.g., tree clearing in rain forests, damming of rivers and destruction of wildlife habitats, replacement of farmlands with wetlands) . . . identify changes in the local ecosystem resulting from human intervention (e.g., river wetlands being replaced by expanded farming activity on a floodplain) . . . identify changes over time in the ecosystem in or near the student's own community resulting from human intervention (e.g., natural wetlands on a floodplain being replaced by farms, farmlands on a floodplain being replaced by housing developments) . . . Explain the reasons for conflict over the use of land and propose strategies to shape a cooperative solution (e.g., try to resolve the controversies surrounding proposals to convert farmland to residential use, build entertainment facilities on national parkland, or set up a recycling center in a wealthy neighborhood) . . . List and describe the environmental effects of human actions on the four basic components of Earth's physical systems: the atmosphere (e.g., effects of ozone depletion, climate change, changes in urban microclimates), the biosphere (e.g., the effect of deforestation, expansion of the savanna, reduction in biodiversity), the lithosphere (e.g., the effect of land degradation, soil salinization and acidification, gully erosion, weathering by polluted air and water), and the hydrosphere (e.g., the effects of ocean pollution, groundwater-quality decline) . . . and on and on and on . . . and I was worried that the little urchins couldn't find Massachusetts on a map?

Finally, I would like to briefly mention the "National Standards for United States History." I won't dwell on this document because it has been covered quite well in the press recently, thanks to the efforts of the charming (Republican women can be described as charming without them being insulted) and brilliant Lynne Cheney (doesn't anyone wonder why it is always her husband who is mentioned as presidential timber?), the former chairman (Republican women can also, I guess, be described as chairman, since this is how she was described in the *Wall Street Journal*) of the National Endowment for the Humanities and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Cheney points out that none of the 31 "standards" listed in this document mentions the Constitution, except in passing, yet there are 19 references to McCarthy and McCarthyism, and 17 to the Ku Klux Klan. Harriet Tubman is mentioned six times, Ulysses Grant once, and Robert E. Lee not at all.

Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk and the Wright brothers also make no appearance. The Gettysburg Address is mentioned once (Lincoln's only appearance), while the Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments" (an early declaration of women's rights) turns up nine times, as does the American Federation of Labor.

John Rockefeller comes up. Students are instructed to conduct a trial in which he is accused of "knowingly and willfully participating in unethical and amoral business practices designed to undermine traditions of fair open competition for personal and private aggrandizement in direct violation of the common welfare." Yet wealth is not considered always bad. Earlier, it is recommended that students "analyze the achievements and grandeur of Mansa Musa's court and

the social customs and wealth of the kingdom of Mali." (For more on this particular nightmare, see the *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1994).

Cheney doesn't say so, but I would suppose there is no mention of Vonnegut in this document either. Yet he once wrote:

*"Tiger got to hunt,  
Bird got to fly;  
Man got to sit and wonder, 'Why, why, why?'  
Tiger got to sleep,  
Bird got to land;  
Man got to tell himself he understand."*

Of course, life is "characterized by hard choices," as they say.

\* Please fax suggested additions to this list to 540-477-9762. [This number has been changed to provide any enterprising reader of today an opportunity to participate in this fax-in opportunity of a by-gone era.]

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