

The Political Forum

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

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CHARACTER, WHERE ART THOU?

Mark L. Melcher

The big political question in the news last week was whether character issues are a legitimate topic for public debate during presidential campaigns. On one level, I found the exercise amusing, since the public discussion about whether or not such issues should be publicly discussed involved much public discussion about allegations that Bill is a philanderer, has engaged in questionable business transactions, has used hard drugs, and has abused presidential power to obstruct justice. This rendered the results of the public discussion almost entirely mute. It reminded me of a debate over whether Al Hunt is an airhead. The "yes" side wins, if Al speaks up to defend himself.

One of the most interesting aspects of the discussion last week was, I thought, that very few of Clinton's defenders defended him against the allegations. Most chose instead to argue about whether they were pertinent to presidential politics. With supporters like this, Bill doesn't need detractors.

In another sense, I found the debate disgusting and disheartening. I mean, if the honesty and integrity of a presidential candidate isn't a legitimate subject for campaign discussion, then what, pray tell, is? And what, pray tell, is happening to this country if there is any doubt about it?

For dyed-in-the wool Democrats, I can understand why they don't want the issue discussed. They have, I believe, basically taken the same view that Bertold Brecht adopted when Nikita Khrushchev produced evidence in 1956 that confirmed that Joseph Stalin was a mass murderer. Brecht, who had just won the Stalin "Peace Prize" and had been a stooge for Stalinism since the end of World War II, allowed as how it made no difference to him what the papers revealed. He explained his indifference this way.

"I have a horse. He is lame, mangy and he squints. Someone comes along and says: but the horse squints, he is lame and, look here, he is mangy. He is right, but what use

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is that to me? I have no other horse. There is no other. The best thing, I think, is to think about his faults as little as possible."

Even the indifference that so many "undecided voters" have shown to the issue of honesty and integrity no longer mystifies me. As I said in a recent piece entitled "A Man For The Times," I think it reflects a dramatically changed attitude toward, and expectations of, the federal government by a very large portion of the population, probably more than a majority.

Basically, I noted in that piece that until relatively recently it was generally believed and understood that the federal government's primary responsibility is to protect the nation from foreign enemies, and to create and ensure an environment that is safe and just and within which each citizen can realize his or her full potential as a human being.

The government, according to this viewpoint, is expected to fulfill its side of the so-called "social contract," as outlined by John Locke, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, and adopted by Thomas Jefferson for American use in the Declaration of Independence. The idea behind this unwritten contract is that citizens give up certain alienable rights in exchange for the government's protection of their inalienable ones, or as Jefferson spelt it, unalienable ones. These, as the Declaration declares, include life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In any case, so long as most Americans believed that a contract existed between the people and their government, most felt it was important that the individual representing the government's side in the contract be a man of honor.

Slowly but surely, this restricted view of Washington's proper role has given way to a more "progressive" one. Today, a very large number of Americans are totally oblivious to the role of government as envisioned by the founding fathers. They expect Washington not to simply provide an environment in which they can pursue their own happiness, but to actually provide happiness for them.

Concomitant with this change in expectations concerning government's proper role has been an equally important shift in the average American's viewpoint as to what constitutes happiness. Again, until recently, most Americans, I believe, subscribed to the Aristotelian viewpoint that while material goods are necessary for happiness, the chief ingredient required for true "happiness" is not telluric, but spiritual, or as Aristotle himself put it, "a life lived in accordance with virtue."

The end result of these two attitudinal shifts is a public that wants and expects the government to provide happiness in the form of material goods. Since the government produces nothing, this means that it must redistribute wealth. The principal consequence of this is that a very large number of Americans care not one wit today about whether the president is a man of character, but only whether he is on their side in the great happiness redistribution scheme that has become the mainstay of the federal government.

Russell Kirk, prescient as always, put it this way in his class 1953 book, *The Conservative Mind*.

But modern populations, upon whom a popular press bestows presumption without knowledge, are resolved to extend the functions of government immeasurably beyond its old duties of defense and maintenance of internal order; for the public is now fascinated with the possibility of obtaining necessities and comforts through action of the state, even to the exclusion of those liberties which once were so resounding a rallying-cry. Economic appetites, now the masters of all classes, incline the public to demand a paternalistic regime; they encourage a variety of cheap Utopian fancies, as popular as they are gross; they lead almost invariably to manipulation of the value of money by the state, with its consequent inflation and insecurity; they are an excuse for profuse public expenditure; they make the labor question doubly dangerous; and the delusion, already dismayingly general, that prosperity depends upon the action of government, must lead to socialism, if wholly triumphant--to a common poverty of body and mind which masquerades as common gratification. . . Corrupt and stupid governments may be tolerated when their activities are confined by prescription to a small and certain sphere; in this age of aggrandizement, however, corrupt and stupid governments deliver us up precipitately to class warfare and international anarchy.

Needless to say, all of this troubles me a great deal. As I said in an article last week, I think there is considerable evidence that the United States is in the midst of the single most corrupt period in its history. If American democracy is to survive this period intact, I believe Americans will need to better understand the dire threat that corruption presents to their way of life. For this reason, I think it is incumbent on the nation's political leaders to be on the alert for corruption and to scream bloody murder when they see it manifested.

Thus, I was particularly upset by Jack Kemp's assertion last week in the debate with Al Gore that he too apparently thinks that character is not particularly important. Kemp sanctimoniously maintained that he believes it would be "beneath" both him and Bob Dole "to go after anyone personally;" thus implying that anyone who does so is himself or herself most probably, unlike Kemp himself, a person of diminished character.

I'm sure this made Kemp feel like he was a real swell guy. And I'm sure it made a lot of Democrats like him. But I think it's hogwash. I think it's nuts. Personally, I want no part of a party that is led by people who believe that the only important political issue is which side can deliver the most material goods.

Don't get me wrong. I believe that management of the economy is an extremely important part of Washington's role today, and therefore a very important part of the political equation. And I think the Dole-Kemp tax cut is a terrific idea. But to maintain, as Kemp did last week, that the moral and ethical behavior of the president is irrelevant, and that the question of who has the best economic plan is the only important issue in the election is not only nonsense, but dangerous nonsense.

In my opinion, Kemp should be using his position to impress upon the American public that there is a reason, a good reason, that the constitution contains guarantees against such transgressions as obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and invasions of privacy. He should stress that there is a reason why tens of thousands of Americans have died, and others have made great sacrifices, in order to insure these guarantees. He should feel comfortable challenging, and

challenging enthusiastically, the character and integrity of any and all candidates for high public office; and he should expect to have his own honesty and integrity challenged as well.

By deliberately scoffing at the importance of character, honor, honesty, courage, morality and ethical behavior, and by maintaining that economic issues are the only important ones, Kemp reinforces the rampant materialism that is, I believe, in large part responsible for the decay that is rotting away at the foundations of American society. And he aggravates the class warfare that Democratic politics promote and that itself is such a destructive cultural force.

As usual, Tocqueville said it best over a century and half ago.

Materialism, among all nations, is a dangerous disease of the human mind; but it is more especially to be dreaded among a democratic people because it readily amalgamates with that vice which is most familiar to the heart under such circumstances. Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification; this taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with mad impatience to these same delights; such is that fatal circle within which democratic nations are driven round. It were well that they should see the danger and hold back.

In my opinion, it were well that Jack Kemp and Bob Dole should see the danger, and stop implying that the most important consideration in choosing a president is which one can provide the most stuff.

Yes, I believe that he should make the argument that a Dole-Kemp administration will promote the material well being of the nation better than Clinton, Gore and the Democrats. But if Kemp and Dole fail to also make the argument that all the material wealth in the world won't matter if the government is run by dishonest people, then they have no more business running the nation than do their opponents. And people interested in the health and well being of the financial markets should be on their guard.

I'd like to close this week with a few related and timeless words from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn's thoughts sometimes make Westerners uneasy, but they emanate from a man of extraordinary wisdom, compassion and spiritual strength, and are always worth considering, particularly at this time when the standards bearers of neither of the nation's two leading political parties can or will say such things.

The strength or weakness of a society depends more on the level of its spiritual life than on its level of industrialization. Neither a market economy nor even general abundance constitutes the crowning achievement of human life. If a nation's spiritual energies have been exhausted, it will not be saved from collapse by the most perfect government structure or by an industrial development: a tree with a rotten core cannot stand. This is so because of all the possible freedoms the one that will inevitably come to the fore will be the freedom to be unscrupulous; that is the freedom that can be neither prevented nor anticipated by any law. It is an unfortunate fact that a pure social atmosphere cannot be legislated into being.

[T]here is a disaster which is already very much with us. I am referring to the calamity of an autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness. It has made man the measure of all things on earth-- imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects. We are now paying for the mistakes which were not properly appraised at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in politics and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our spiritual life. It is trampled by the party mob in the East, by the commercial one in the West. This is the essence of the crisis; the split in the world is less terrifying than the similarity of the disease afflicting its main sections . . .

[H]atred is in fact corroding many hearts today. Atheist teachers in the West are bringing up a younger generation in the spirit of hatred of their own society. Amid all the vituperation we forget that the defects of capitalism represent the basic flaws of human nature, allowed unlimited freedom together with the various human rights This eager fanning of the flames of hatred is becoming the mark of today's free world. Indeed, the broader the personal freedoms are, the higher the level of prosperity or even of abundance -- the more vehement, paradoxically, does this blind hatred become. The contemporary developed West thus demonstrates by its own example, that human salvation can be found neither in the profusion of material goods nor in merely making money . . . Let us ask ourselves: Are not the ideals of our century false? And is not our glib and fashionable terminology just as unsound, a terminology that offers superficial remedies for every difficulty? Each of them, in whatever sphere, must be subjected to a clear-eyed scrutiny while there is still time. The solution of the crisis will not be found along the well-trodden paths of conventional thinking. Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest for worthy spiritual growth.

All hope cannot be pinned on science, technology, economic growth. The victory of technological civilization has also instilled a spiritual insecurity in us. Its gifts enrich, but enslave us as well . . . all is a struggle for material things; but an inner voice tells us that we have lost something pure, elevated, and fragile. We have ceased to see the purpose. Let us admit, even if in a whisper and only to ourselves: In this bustle of life at breakneck speed-what are we living for?

A tax cut, Jack? Is that it?

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