

The Political Forum

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

Mark L. Melcher
Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup
Senior Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

Friday, May 30, 2003

A REPRINT FROM A PIECE PUBLISHED JANUARY 7, 1998

LEFT OF NERO

Mark L. Melcher

My last article, in the "Fearless Forecast" edition (entitled "Situation Normal, All Fouled Up," dated December 17, 1997), was, on balance, optimistic, particularly as regards domestic fiscal policy and political trends. Shortly after I finished writing it, I received the Winter 1998 bulletin of the National Humanities Institute (NHI), which featured an article by the organization's president Joe Baldacchino, a good friend, a superb writer and a clear minded conservative.

I thought I would begin this week with a quote from Joe's piece, because he makes the important point, which I think is well worth considering as the new year opens, that while the economy and the GOP may be doing well, American society is still deeply troubled.

Besides providing a meaningful counterpoint to my "Fearless Forecast" optimism, Joe's piece provides a good excuse for me to offer some thoughts on the subject, and have a little first-of-the-year fun by, among other things, citing a few of those dead white European males (DWEMs) that liberals so despise.

NHI, by the way, is a non-profit, Washington-based organization that believes that the cultural decay that infects society today cannot be reversed by legislation; that the battle for the soul of America will ultimately be won or lost in the humanities classes of the nation's high schools, colleges and universities, where the DWEMs are under siege.

I discussed NHI at some length in a recent piece entitled "Keep The Faith Conservatives, And Support Your Local Humanities Department," so I won't say any more about it this week, except to note that more information can be found on our (I am on the board of the Institute) Web site, <http://nhinet.org>. Space doesn't permit me to do justice to Joe's fine article, but here are a few thoughts from it.

The "state of humanity steadily improving"? Our "standard of living" at an all-time high? Surely, that depends upon how these terms are defined. In the 1940s, when young women flocked from homes in rural areas into cities like Washington and New

Subscriptions to The Political Forum are available by contacting:
The Political Forum

8563 Senedo Rd., Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Tel 540-477-9762, Fax 540-477-3359, Email melcher@thepoliticalforum.com,
or visit us at www.thepoliticalforum.com

York to help with the war effort, they were free for the most part to walk the streets, even late at night, in relative safety. Today, wide swaths of America's cities--and increasingly its suburbs and rural hamlets as well--are no-man's lands, where outsiders dare not enter and where residents cower behind locked doors. Dr. Peter Beilenson, the Baltimore health commissioner, estimates that in that city alone there are 55,000 drug addicts, nearly one-tenth of the entire population. The experience of other American cities is similar. With legions of addicts supporting expensive habits by preying on the citizenry, personal security, a fundamental right once taken for granted, is increasingly scarce . . .

From the depreciation of family and neighborly relations there follows, as Burke warned, the dissipation of all those qualities which raise life above mere survival and infuse it with elegance, dignity, and high purpose. This is not surprising, since a love for ends that transcend narrow selfishness is learned, first of all, in the family and the neighborhood. The destruction of what Burke called "the unbought grace of life" may not be incorporated in the positivists' quantitative models, but it can be seen--and heard--in the real world every day. In our routine lives we both perpetrate and suffer a coarseness of dress, speech, and manners that would have shocked our parents' or grandparents' generations. In our cultural lives we celebrate banality and worship celebrity. In our political lives we blithely obey and sustain with our taxes a government that violates its constitutional charter with impunity . . .

The economy may be in good shape for the moment, but American society is sinking into the mire. When the President was asked at a recent news conference about one of the scandals with which his administration has been associated, he responded, good humanitarian that he is, that the morality that counts could be found in his policies, not his personal character. Public opinion seems to side with the President. His approval ratings stand near record highs despite widespread allegations of wrongdoing. This should come as no surprise, given the growing displacement of the morality of personal restraint by various forms of pseudo-ethics that appeal to Americans on both ends of the political spectrum.

The eclipse of inward morality is deadly. On the one side, it invites political tyranny. As Burke warned two centuries ago, "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without." On the other side, the depreciation of personal integrity undermines respect for law, tradition, manners, taste, and general decency, bringing corruption, litigiousness, and incipient anarchy in its train. America is feeling the effects of both tendencies as ways of life long respected are now persecuted, behavior previously scorned is now glorified, and our government, for corruption and intrusiveness, increasingly resembles a cross between a banana republic and the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union.

So who's right? Well, I believe we both are. As I noted almost exactly four years ago in two articles entitled "The Inevitability of Decay" Parts I and II, history demonstrates that economies often thrive during the early stages of corruption and moral breakdown, since the former

provides competitive advantage to large enterprises and the latter more often than not promotes an aggressive materialism, which is conducive to trade.

In fact, as I noted in the first of those two "decay" pieces, Polybius, the Greek historian who was with his friend, the great Roman general Scipio when the latter sacked and destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C., believed that societal rot was a natural consequence of prosperity. His thoughts on the subject are, I believe, quite relevant today, as America enters the new millennium as the most powerful nation, both economically and militarily, that the world has ever seen.

All things are subject to decay and change. When a state, after having passed with safety through many and great dangers, arrives at the highest degree of power, and possesses an entire and undisputed sovereignty, it is manifest that the long continuance of prosperity must give birth to costly and luxurious manners, and that the minds of men will be heated with ambitious contests, and become too eager and aspiring in the pursuit of dignities.

And as those evils are continually increased, the desire of power and rule, and the imagined ignominy of remaining in a subject state, will first begin to work the ruin of the republic; arrogance and luxury will afterwards advance it; and in the end the change will be completed by the people; when the avarice of some is found to injure and oppress them, and the ambition of others swells their vanity, and poisons them with flattering hopes.

For then, being inflamed with rage, and following only the dictates of their passions, they no longer will submit to any control, or be contented with an equal share of the administration, in conjunction with their rules; but will draw to themselves the entire sovereignty and supreme direction of all affairs. When this is done, the government will assume indeed the fairest of all names, that of a free and popular state; but will in truth be the greatest of all evils, the government of the multitude.

Polybius was, of course, prescient. When Carthage fell, Rome became, as America is today, an unrivaled world power. Moreover, Roman society at that time was at its pinnacle, marked by discipline, piety and honor. In fact, Polybius noted that "in other states, a man is rarely to be found whose hands are pure from public robbery; so, among the Romans, it is no less rare to discover one that is tainted with this crime."

Thirteen years later, Roman society began its centuries long period of moral and spiritual decline. Yet, there is evidence that commerce continued briskly almost until the end in 410, when Alaric sacked the city as the Emperor Flavius Honorius tended to his pet chickens in Ravenna.

One can, of course, become too aggressive in drawing lessons from Roman history. But I think it is fair to conclude from the record that economic growth and societal rot are compatible, at least for a while. Indeed, the great Roman poet Juvenal linked the two when he noted that "Luxury more cruel than the foeman's arms, fell upon us, and is avenging the conquered world."

Before closing, I would like to make two other observations regarding the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The first is just for fun. The second is more serious.

Regarding the first, I think it is worth noting that of all the extraordinary characters that populated the five centuries long period of Roman decline, the names of two are still reasonably well known in American pop culture. They are Nero, because he supposedly "fiddled while Rome burned," and Attila, who is largely remembered because of the snotty liberal cliché about certain conservatives being "right of Attila the Hun."

My guess is that most folks who use this latter expression probably couldn't place Attila in the proper century, much less give a thumbnail sketch of his place in history. So I thought it might be worth noting that Attila was one of history's great warriors, and according to the eminent 19th century British historian, E.S. Creasy, he was "not one of the vulgar herd of barbaric conquerors." In fact, Creasy says the following.

Consummate military skill may be traced in his campaigns; and he relied far less on the brute force of armies for the aggrandizement of his empire, than on the unbounded influence over the affections of friends and the fears of foes which his genius enabled him to acquire. Austerely sober in his private life--severely just on the judgment seat--conspicuous among a nation of warriors for hardihood, strength, and skill in every martial exercise--grave and deliberate in counsel, but rapid and remorseless in execution, he gave safety and security to all who were under his dominion.

Given this description, I am not certain what being "right of Attila" actually means. I prefer to believe that, since Attila was a pagan, it describes someone with Attila's finest attributes, plus a belief in a God of mercy.

Now Nero's story is slightly different. For starters, he was a strong *proponent of the concept of relative morality*, or more precisely, he was an advocate of what the great 20th century philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls emotivism, "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling."

As might be expected, Nero was *not much for family values*. (The Roman historian Suetonius notes that, among other things, he tried to have his mother, Agrippina, drowned and when that failed he had her beaten to death. He had his first wife Octavia murdered, and he personally kicked to death his second wife, Poppaea, who was in the advance stages of pregnancy.)

He was also, as we would say today, *sexually enlightened*. (After Poppaea's death, Suetonius reports that he found a young man named Sporus, who looked like her, had him castrated, and married him in a formal ceremony.)

He was *not big on law and order*. (The Roman historian Tacitus reports that Nero disguised himself and visited brothels, and roamed the streets with friends, robbing shops, insulting women and "practicing lewdness on boys, stripping those whom they encountered, striking, wounding, murdering.")

He *frowned on religion*, even the local variety. (Suetonius reports that Nero once "voided his bladder upon an image of the goddess whom he most respected, Cybele." He was especially hard on Christianity. In fact, he accused the Christians of setting the fires that burned Rome and as a result, according to Tacitus, many "were put to death with exquisite cruelty, and to their sufferings Nero added mockery and derision.)

Finally, he was *big on class warfare, welfare, decadent entertainment and deficit spending*. (He provided the poor with "bread and circuses," and confiscated the property of the rich to pay the huge government deficits created by his profligacy.)

In short, it seems to me that if it is fair to say that Attila had many of the attributes of today's conservatives, it would seem equally fair to note that Nero held many of the same views about society as today's liberals. Hence, one wonders if the expression "left of Nero" would not be as fair an expression as "right of Attila." Just a thought, mind you.

The second point I'd like to make relative to the fall of Rome is, as I said earlier, more serious. It has to do with the observation that the surest sign that moral decay had reached the Roman populace, and was not confined to the entourage of a long string of debased emperors, was that the most dissolute emperors, such as Nero, were quite popular with the Roman proletariat, while the occasional emperor of excellence, such as Marcus Aurelius, was held in disdain.

The historian Will Durant notes that Marcus Aurelius, one of Rome's greatest leaders, was publicly jeered by the rabble for displaying empathy for the victims of the gladiator shows, which he was, as emperor, obligated to attend.

Durant says that Nero, on the other hand, was enormously popular. He fashioned himself as what we would today call "an ordinary guy." He cavorted with artists and poets, the celebrities of his day. He sang and recited poetry to public audiences, today's equivalent of playing golf.

"The populace was delighted to have an emperor entertain it." Durant says. "It took up the songs that Nero sang and repeated them in the taverns and the streets . . . His popularity, instead of waning, grew." Needless to say, Nero's baseness, and the corruption in which he was immersed, were largely overlooked, even by the Senatorial class, which was loath to offend the masses. Sound familiar?

It remains to be seen whether the American public's apparent indifference to the corruption and ethical sloth that permeates Washington today is, as some people maintain, a temporary consequence of the "peace and prosperity" that marks American society at the close of the 20th century; or if it is evidence, as it was in Nero's time, that the societal decay has advanced to a new stage.

I find it extremely troubling that a seemingly large share of the public has, as Joe indicated above, apparently acquiesced in Bill's insistence that the morality that counts could be found in his policies, not his personal character. It looks to me as though this is *de facto* evidence that an awful lot of people now reject one of the most significant of the moral principles that underlie and define Western society, that of individual responsibility.

It is important to understand here that Bill's statement is almost certainly not simply a flippant remark, designed to temporarily deflect attention from his personal actions. If he didn't sincerely believe that his good intentions excuse his actions, I don't believe he could show such a remarkable comfort level with the maelstrom of scandal that surrounds him.

This isn't as far fetched as it may sound to a philosophic traditionalist. In fact, Bill's statement is perfectly representative of an iconoclastic, post-modern philosophical belief system that appears to be gaining new advocates daily.

One of the most prominent champions of this new view of what constitutes acceptable moral behavior is the somewhat nutty, but well known, "post analytic" philosopher Richard Rorty. Besides arguing that "there is no such thing as the truth," Rorty maintains that the mere "expression of liberal opinions guarantees personal innocence in a cruel world."

James Seaton, in his most recent book, *Cultural Conservatism, Political Liberals: From Criticism to Cultural Studies*, describes this position as the Blanche Dubois defense. Dubois was, of course, the pathetic heroine of Tennessee Williams' famous play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who proclaimed that she was an innocent soul, despite her moral lapses, because she was never guilty of "the one unforgivable thing, deliberate cruelty."

Roger Shattuck, the award winning author and professor of literature at Boston University, in his remarkable book *Forbidden Knowledge*, provides disquieting anecdotal evidence that adherence to this belief system has been rife among university students for a long time. Shattuck notes that as early as the mid-1970s, 18 of 22 students in a discussion of Camus' story *The Stranger* sympathized with Meursault, the unrepentant killer in the story.

One student, Shattuck notes, argued that, by committing murder, Meursault had merely "yanked away the security blankets civilization tenaciously clings to." Shattuck himself argues that Meursault, rather than being a sympathetic character, represents the most reprehensible of humans: "the citizen whose passiveness and stunted imagination allows him to yield to outside pressures to carry out inhuman action."

A more recent example of Americans buying into another of Bill's iconoclastic views of moral philosophy was the silence that greeted his proclamation last spring that the irregular (to say the least) means used by the Democratic party to raise funds during the 1966 election cycle were justified by ends. "We were fighting a battle not simply for our re-election, but over the entire direction of the country for years to come," he said.

There was a time when such a statement by an elected official to justify unethical, and possibly illegal, behavior, would have been greeted by howls of derision by the American public. Today, as we have seen, such expressions find wide acceptance.

The spurious philosophical construct that underlies this statement is known as teleological ethics, or consequentialism. It traces its modern roots to one of the founders of modern day liberalism, the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who argued that "good" and "evil" are nothing more than names that humans give to their appetites, and who was perfectly willing to let the state decide what these appetites would be. Here's how he put it.

But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man, where there is no Commonwealth; or, in a Commonwealth, from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disageeing shall by consent set up and make his sentence the rule thereof.

In the following century, Jeremy Bentham, the British philosopher and icon of today's liberals, expanded upon this nihilistic philosophy, arguing that an action is moral, or "good," so long as it promotes "the happiness of the greatest number."

The fancy word for the antithesis of this philosophy is deontological ethics. There is no need to provide a complicated explanation of this way of looking at things. It was the view of the overwhelming majority of Americans until the mid-1960s, and was succinctly described as follows by Cicero just over 2000 years ago in a letter to his son, Marcus.

So let us regard this as settled: what is morally wrong can never be advantageous, even when it enables you to make some gain that you believe to be to your advantage. The mere act of believing that some wrongful course of action constitutes an advantage is pernicious.

Cicero would have been appalled by the idea that unethical actions, most especially by the leader of the world's most powerful nation, could be excused by the "greater good" theory, as outlined centuries later by Bentham and as adopted most recently by Bill Clinton.

He would have argued that such a pernicious construct would inevitably lead to massive corruption and to the eventual ruin of the state. Indeed, in his own way, he argued just that. This is how he put it.

Right and advantage are, by definition, identical. Once let a man fail to understand that, and no species of fraudulence or crime will come amiss to him. If he argues one course is certainly right, but the other is to my advantage, he will be tearing asunder two things which nature has joined together. And such misguided audacity leads to every sort of deception, crime, and sin.

Cicero proved to be correct about the impact of such a belief system on Rome. As things stand now, it looks as though Americans will eventually find out if his forecast applies to the good old US of A. My guess, and Joe's, is that it will.

THE POLITICAL FORUM

Copyright 2003. The Political Forum. 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842, tel. 540-477-9762, fax 540-477-3359. All rights reserved. Information contained herein is based on data obtained from recognized services, issuer reports or communications, or other sources believed to be reliable. However, such information has not been verified by us, and we do not make any representations as to its accuracy or completeness, and we are not responsible for typographical errors. Any statements nonfactual in nature constitute only current opinions which are subject to change without notice.