

The Political Forum

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

Mark L. Melcher
President
melcher@shentel.net

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CLINTON IS LIKED, BUT IS HE WELL LIKED?

Mark L. Melcher

There are people, you know, who *love* their medium; sculptors who love marble, potters who love clay, stockbrokers who love the market, Hollywood writers who love being around movie stars.

Then there's me. I love my job, writing and talking about politics. But my medium . . . well, let's just say that I sometimes feel like the guy whose job it is to clean the toilets in commercial aircraft, but who won't quit because he doesn't want to "leave aviation." I once told a shrink friend of mine that I write about U.S. politics for a living. He told me that I *should* be depressed. He said I'd be crazy if I weren't.

You think I'm exaggerating? Listen! Last week that gaggle of gasbags that *The Washington Post* refers to as the "democratic congressional negotiators" significantly watered down the "deficit reduction" part of Clinton's "economic plan" (which was *already* very short on "deficit reduction"), all the while proclaiming that the whole process was a "significant victory" over deficits.

The explanation for this madness? Well, the honorable members (and, as Dave Barry says, I'm not making this up) said they had to eliminate some proposed spending cuts that affected western and farm states, in order to win the support of legislators from those states for an additional \$16.3 billion of new federal spending they say is needed to "stimulate" the economy.

Not one "democratic congressional negotiator" suggested subtracting the money the farm and western states wanted to keep in the budget from the \$16.3 billion of proposed "stimulus." Nor did any member suggest that it might even be better to cut the entire \$16.3 billion "stimulus" package out altogether, thus letting the people who earned the money spend it *themselves*. Makes too much sense, you say? I know. I know.

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, e-mail melcher@shentel.net

Anyway, all the while this multi-billion dollar give-away-gong-show was taking place, various House members were publicly agonizing over the horrors ahead for Western civilization as a result of the closing down of four "select" committees they happened to chair. Bear in mind, when reading the following, that no problem of interest to these multimillion dollar, publicly funded, public relations forums for prominent democrats will go unnoticed on Capitol Hill as a result of their shutdown.

o Rep. Tony Hall (D., Ohio), former chairman of the former Select Committee on Hunger, performing a reasonably good imitation of Lillian Gish on the ice flow, said he would fast "until I feel at peace that things are happening" in Congress to alleviate hunger and famine. He dramatically ventured the view that "Congress is afflicted with famine. We are hungry for heart-heart for the needy, the powerless and the forgotten." He said nothing about an abundance of pork up there.

o Rep. Pat Schroeder (D., Colo.), former head of the former Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, in a brilliant display of the hyperbole for which she is so well known, allowed as how the closing of her committee clearly demonstrated that "we care more about owls than kids."

o Rep. William J. Hughes (D., N.J.), former chairman of the former Select Committee on Aging, said he was considering whether to park a trailer on the Capitol grounds in order to assure that the elderly had a place to air their concerns.

Waxing poetic, and ignoring the fact that the American Association of Retired Persons still retains a certain degree of influence on Capitol Hill despite the loss of his committee, Hughes said he was worried that aging issues would "die on the altar of reform politics." This led some observers to wonder where the Valley Girls of yesteryear are today when they are so badly needed to say "gag me with a spoon" at appropriate moments.

o Finally, we have the irrepressible Rep. Charles Rangel (D., N.Y.), former chairman of the former Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control. Rangel said he plans to form the 30 former members of his committee into a "Drug Control Caucus," so as to be sure that drug abuse doesn't sink from public consciousness, God forbid. This brought to mind the old joke about the difference between a caucus and a cactus. But that's another story.

I am, of course, aware that none of this is new. But I have been struck lately by the number of questions I have received while on the road visiting clients about whether this "new" Congress might "make a difference." Lurking behind each of these questions is the touching thought that Congress will be more responsible this year, since there are quite a number of new members, and virtually all of them "came to town with a mandate from voters to reduce the deficit."

My psychiatrist buddy, the guy I mentioned above, says that voicing such thoughts in public could be an early sign of mental illness. "A textbook cry for help," he called it. So I thought this week I would try to bring a dash of reality to the scene, in hopes of saving someone, somewhere from going off the deep end and believing, or more importantly acting upon, some of the propaganda that flows daily from Capitol Hill.

Let me begin with a truism I created recently, but have never included in [one of these pieces before this.] It goes like this. "The U.S. Congress is to government, what the duck-billed platypus is to evolution." Congress is a political curiosity, a developmental dead end, well intended perhaps by its maker, but quite unsuited as a model for any future creations.

When the nation is blessed with an effective, wise and popular president, Congress acts as a ratifier. When the nation has a weak, unpopular president, Congress flounders around like a large fish on the deck of a crowded boat, causing much consternation and an occasional accident, but doing little to fill the leadership void created by having a doofus in the White House.

There is an important message here, by the way. That is that Clinton must retain his popularity if he is to govern effectively. If he crashes and burns in the polls, for whatever reason, Congress will do its fish routine. They call it gridlock. I prefer to think of it as a highly important, fail safe mechanism that automatically kicks on to limit damage to the machine when operator error is detected.

My advice to those watching Clinton's economic plan work its way through Congress is to never forget that Clinton is a salesman, not an economist. He's selling his program "on a smile and a shoeshine," like Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman." He's not selling it on economics, because the economics of the plan make little sense, even to legislators, most of whom think Adam Smith was one of those guys with a black beard on the cough drop box.

I happen to think Clinton's smile will work for a while; that when the dust settles on the on-going battle with Congressional Republicans, he will have won most of his plan, at least those parts about which he seems to care, the tax and spending hikes. He has, after all, a hell of a smile. And he's still reasonably well liked by the general public. But the markets should watch his popularity numbers closely. Congress' attitude toward Clinton and his program will change quickly if he begins to drop in the polls; if the smile and the shoeshine stop working.

As Charley said in his requiem for Willy: "When they start not smiling back--that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished." If it happens to Bill as it happened to Willy, Congress will shed no tears for him, as I do for Willy, each time I read *Death of a Salesman*. Congress will bail out on him. And they'll bail out on his economic program too, because the economics behind it are not convincing enough to justify it without broad public support.

It is, of course, anyone's guess how long Bill can sustain his popularity. As a general rule, I think he has a tougher fight ahead of him than any of his predecessors, not because of anything personal to him, but because the American public expects more from the government today than it did in the past.

It is fair to say, I think, that prior to World War II most Americans generally believed that the primary function of government was, in the words of Russell Kirk, "to keep the peace, by repelling foreign enemies and by administering justice domestically." Today, an increasing number of Americans seem to hold the government responsible for their very happiness.

This point was dramatically illustrated during the presidential debate last year in Richmond, when a questioner from the audience said the following. "We are symbolically your children, we have our needs, what will you do to take care of us, and take care of our needs?" And neither candidate contested the idea that the government has a responsibility to take care of individual "needs," or to question the wisdom of establishing what Margaret Thatcher describes as a "nanny state."

Nor did either candidate point out to the questioner, and to the American public, that the writings of learned philosophers from Aristotle onward generally agree that personal happiness can be achieved through individual effort alone, by striving to realize one's innate capabilities through productive work and moral discipline; that happiness cannot be provided by the government, no matter how firmly many Americans want to believe it can be.

By not addressing the question in this manner, Bush provided insights into why he was incapable of rallying conservatives to his reelection campaign. Clinton, by taking the question seriously, set himself up for possible trouble during his term.

Filling the "needs" of the nation's baby boomers, quite probably the most "needful" and spoiled demographic cohort to hit the American scene since the British redcoats, will be a tough task. And they can be a testy lot if they don't get their way. Ask their parents. Or, better yet, ask someone who employs a bunch of them. Good luck, Bill.

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