

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

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To Err Is Human, To Sweat Over It In Public Is Gauche

**Mark L. Melcher
Stephen R. Soukup**

As regular readers of these pages know, I have slowly, over the past year or so, gained great respect for Bill Clinton's political acumen. Whereas I once thought that he was way out of his league in the heady political environment of Washington, I now believe, as I said in a recent article entitled "Three Cheers For Bill," that he and his entourage "are the best political operatives this town has seen since the days of Lyndon Johnson."

It goes without saying that this does not mean that I agree with Bill's goals or methods. I am simply saying that I think the political skills he employs to achieve his ends, and to protect his backside, are remarkable. In fact, watching him in action puts me in mind of Captain Ahab's observation about himself. "All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad."

I must admit, of course, that some of my recently acquired respect for Bill's political skills has been influenced by the fact that he has been very good for my career, such as it is. Indeed, every day I feel about him a little more like British satirist John Wolcot is reported to have felt about King George III. When Wolcot was asked by an old lady if he didn't think that his biting criticism of the unbalanced monarch didn't make him a very bad subject of the King, he reportedly responded as follows: "I do not know anything about that Madam, but I do know the King has been a devilish good subject for me."

And so Bill has been for me. Not only do he and his amazing klatch of crooked colleagues provide a constant source of material for my articles, and for my personal musings about politics and society, but they have also given me many humbling lessons. One of the most important is that, in this age of the baby boomers, the American public has a great deal more tolerance for political corruption, and ethical and moral laxness in their politicians, than I had ever imagined.

Thus, it is with some trepidation that I proffer the thought this week that Al's recent brushes with ethical sloth are likely to doom his long term political prospects. Nevertheless, I truly believe that good old Al will be looking for work early in 2001.

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

Yes, the highly effective tools that Bill and his crowd have developed to sway public opinion, to keep their critics and the law at bay, and to control the media will be available to Gore. But somehow I don't think that the skill it takes to use these tools effectively is so easily transferable.

Like him or not, Bill is a very charming guy. More importantly, as Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, once said, he is "an unusually good liar. Unusually good." Al isn't either. In fact, time and again he has demonstrated that he becomes fidgety in a pinch. Like Nixon, he sweats, both figuratively and literally. Bill never does.

As the *Washington Times* editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden, a razorback himself, points out, Bill didn't grow up in Hope, Arkansas, but in Hot Springs where, amid the bawdy houses, the professional gamblers and the organized crime syndicates, "everyone learned a scam with the multiplication tables," and where "a little sleaze" was never held against anyone. Al grew up in the shelter of official Washington, where his father's prominence and the elite environment of St. Albans prep school made the development of such survival skills unnecessary.

These "shortcomings" were of no importance to Al when he was widely believed to be, as described by the *Washington Post*, "a politician of integrity and personal probity," or as *Post* sports writer and humorist Tony Kornheiser put it recently, "as clean as the agitator in a Maytag washer." But they leave him vulnerable in the rough and tumble world of Bill Clinton, where the words integrity and probity are considered nothing more than props; where the political weapons of choice are great doses of chutzpah, poise under fire, unflinching trust in the ignorance of the masses, and the ability to be "an unusually good liar."

Space does not permit a complete rundown of all the legal trouble Al is in, but my colleague Steve Soukup and I have compiled a brief synopsis of his woes, which I think demonstrates that the old Vanderbilt divinity school student will have to deliver a heck of a sermon in the days ahead if he hopes to retain even a semblance of personal sanctity.

Al's public troubles began on March 3, when he admitted that "on a few occasions I made some [fund-raising] telephone calls from the White House." Despite his claim that "all of the calls that I made were charged to the DNC," this admission alone would have, according to at least two previous White House counsels (Bernard Nussbaum and Abner Mikva), been enough evidence to indicate that Al had violated both the spirit and the letter of the law.

Incidentally, the law in question, Section 607 of Title 18 of the federal criminal code, reads: "It shall be unlawful for any person to solicit any contribution . . . in any room or building occupied in the discharge of official duties . . . Any person who violates this section shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than three years, or both."

Consequently, Nussbaum and Mikva counseled the administration that "this means that fund-raising events may *not* be held in the White House; that no fund-raising phone calls may emanate from the White House or any other Federal buildings; and that no campaign contributions may be accepted at the White House or any other Federal building."

Of course, it turns out that Al's original statement not only admitted an illegality, but was also almost entirely false. The first part of the statement to crumble was his assertion that all calls

were billed to the DNC. The day after his press conference he revealed that the calls he had made from his office were actually billed to a Clinton-Gore credit card.

In late August, the story further crumbled when the AP reported that at least 20 of Al's calls were actually billed to taxpayers. According to the AP, in June, when a billing discrepancy was discovered on the White House phone bill, the DNC "quietly" wrote a check to the Treasury to cover the long distance charges.

Finally, Al's contention that on a "few" occasions he had made "some" fund-raising calls also proved to be false. Again, in late August, documents turned over to Congressional investigators indicated that on 10 occasions Al made a grand total of 86 calls from his White House office. As the *Washington Times* opined in a September 4 piece, that's "not a 'few'" and "hardly 'some.'"

The last part of Al's patchwork defense to fall apart was not the product of his now-infamous press conference. Rather, it was the defense dreamt up by Attorney General Janet Reno in her desperate attempt to rationalize her refusal to appoint an independent counsel to investigate these obvious violations of the law. Reno wrote that the "law specifically applies only to contributions as technically defined by the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) -- funds commonly referred to as 'hard money.'" The DNC claimed that the contributions solicited by Al constituted "soft money" and, as such, were exempt from FECA standards. Thus, Reno's argument went, Al could not have broken the law.

She then apparently did her best to ensure that her defense of Al's phone calls held up. The *Washington Times* describes the investigation conducted by Reno's 90 attorneys, FBI agents and staff from the campaign-finance task force, as follows.

"Despite the department's nearly year-long investigation of the campaign-finance scandal, an investigation during which Miss Reno has repeatedly rejected congressional requests to seek the appointment of an independent counsel, nobody from her crack squad of career investigators in the Public Integrity Section seems to have bothered to telephone or visit the DNC to make a simple inquiry," namely whether Al and Janet's contention that all money raised was "soft money."

Instead, Janet read about it in the *Washington Post*, where on Sept. 3 the revered president-smasher Bob Woodward reported that despite the DNC's claims and Reno's affirmation, "more than \$120,000 in campaign contributions solicited in 1995-96 by Vice President Al Gore . . . went into a 'hard money' account subject to federal election limits."

This revelation prompted even the op-ed staff of *The New York Times*, one of the most famously liberal papers in the country, to admit that, "despite Mr. Gore's famous comment that 'no controlling authority' restricted his actions, [in light of Woodward's story] he appears to have broken the law." More recently, Senator Fred Thompson (Tenn.) has released documents that confirm the *Times'* conclusion. Among them were several memos written by a DNC official that were forwarded to Bill and Al and stamped, "The President Has Seen." These detail the process whereby the first \$20,000 raised by White House phone solicitations would be deposited in "hard money" accounts.

All of this evidence of criminal wrongdoing in the case of Al's fund-raising calls appears to be so overwhelming that Reno has been forced (kicking and screaming all the way) to request a 30-day review of his actions, which is the first step on the path towards the possible appointment of an independent counsel.

Lest ye forget, the aforementioned calls were not the first illegal fund-raising activity to be associated with Al Gore. Nor were his statements about those calls the first such statements to have been proven disingenuous and intentionally misleading.

In April last year, Al attended a fund-raiser at the Hsi-Lai Buddhist temple in LA and raised \$140,000. The problem is that it is illegal to hold a partisan fund-raiser at a tax-exempt religious facility. When this unhappy circumstance was first revealed, Al asserted that "No.1, we have strictly abided by all of the campaign-finance laws, strictly. There've been no violations," and number two, he thought the whole thing was simply a "community outreach event."

In April of this year, however, Harold Ickes, former Deputy White House Chief of Staff, turned over to Congress more than 30 documents, many of which demonstrated that individuals in the DNC, the White House, and even in Gore's office knew that the event scheduled at the temple was a fund-raiser. In fact, more than three months earlier, Gore's office was notified that the event was to generate at least \$200,000.

Also, according to the *Washington Times*, two weeks before the meeting at Hsi-Lai, John Huang sent Al's director of scheduling a reminder about the "fund-raising lunch for Vice President Gore." The reminder specified that the "proposed location" for the event was "Hsi Lai Temple." The *Times* continues, "Four days later, National Security Council staff members began circulating memos discussing the international implications of 'a fund-raising lunch for about 150 people in the VP's honor.'" And finally, five days before the event, an e-mail message circulated throughout the White House indicating that the Vice President had a "DNC funder for lunch" scheduled for the day in question.

But none of this seems to have fazed Al. You see, he claims that, despite the fact that everyone involved who was not in a coma seems to have known that the event scheduled at the Hsi-Lai Temple was a fund-raiser, he was kept in the dark.

Now I am not predicting here that Al's legal transgressions will lead to legal problems for him. Another hard lesson I've learned from watching the Clinton crowd in action is that one can't assume anymore that suspicion actions by high ranking officials will lead to a court room.

Not even the appointment of a independent counsel is any assurance that action will be taken, as has been demonstrated by the conduct of the phlegmatic and timid Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, who has been reasonably active in his Little Rock investigation, but seems to be scared to death at the thought of taking on anyone important in Clinton's Washington entourage.

What I do think is that Al's legal problems will prompt numerous Democrats to challenge him in the 2000 primaries. And this, I believe, will be the end of his presidential aspirations.

You see, besides his tarnished Boy Scout image, Al's public life has been marked by an amazing array of disingenuous and hypocritical actions. In a presidential race these would likely be ignored or downplayed by the mainstream media, out of deference to his being the Democratic candidate. But in the Democratic primaries, these are likely to get a full airing, since they will be brought up by other Democrats.

Space doesn't permit a full airing here. But an example might, I think, be instructive. For those who would like more (indeed, a lot more) I would recommend an article by Tucker Carlson entitled "The Real Al Gore," in the May 19, 1997 issue of *The Weekly Standard*.

As you may recall, during the mid-1980's, Al was first thrust into the national spotlight as the husband of the woman crusading to free America's youth from the bonds of filthy and violent rock n' roll lyrics. Tipper Gore, the co-founder of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), was a true believer. Columnist Clarence Page wrote that Mrs. Gore "fired up" the group of "high-powered spouses widely known as the 'Washington Wives,'" who came to form the core of PMRC.

It was primarily through Tipper's efforts that the PMRC quickly compelled the Senate Commerce Committee to hold hearings on the subject of obscene rock lyrics. At the height of the furor, the *Washington Post* quoted Tipper as saying:

"The children really don't have a choice . . . They flip through the record bin and see a cover with a nude woman gagged and chained to a motorcycle, or another one simulating masturbation with a light bulb . . . Some of it I can't even bring myself to talk about. It's simply gone too far, and it has to be stopped.

And Tipper was not alone in her crusade. Lo and behold who should turn up on the committee holding the hearings but Al. Henry Schipper penned a piece for *Daily Variety* that documented Al's dedication to his wife's cause. "Gore was among the first to arrive [at the hearings] and the last to leave, he questioned, often vigorously and at length, every witness or group of witnesses to come before the panel, and in his opening statement he explicitly 'commended' committee chairman Sen. John Danforth (R., Mo.) for convening the meeting." The battle against rock was truly a Gore family affair.

Unfortunately for the Gores, the "entertainment" industry has a long memory, and three years after the hearings, when Al was running for president, Hollywood was eager to take the Gores to task for their roles in what they perceived to be an attempt at censorship. Needless to say, Al and Tipper quickly began whistling a different tune. In the words of Clarence Page, "Rock lyrics seem less objectionable during a campaign."

Tucker Carlson describes the merriment that ensued when the Gores had their change of heart. "One afternoon in late October [1987], Al and Tipper found themselves in the executive dining room at the MCA building in LA with Norman Lear, Danny Goldberg, Don Henley, a number of record company presidents, and the lawyer who represents the artist then known only as Prince." (This lawyer, by the way, was none other than Clinton friend, and later senior campaign consultant, Mickey Kantor.)

While the meeting was supposed to be confidential, one of the participants brought a hidden tape recorder and later leaked a tape to a reporter at *Daily Variety* [Henry Schipper]."

The tape reveals that Both Gores apologized profusely. Tipper called the hearings a "mistake" and rambled on about her opposition to "censorship." Al proclaimed that he had been opposed to the hearings, but as a freshman minority member of the committee, was railroaded into participating by "publicity-hungry Republicans." Tipper even agreed with Irving Azoff that perhaps she should change the name of her organization, Parents Music Resource Center, by dropping "Music" from its title. Unfortunately, this meeting at MCA was not the end of the Gore's desperate attempt to dance around their problem with the entertainment media. Again, in the words of Carlson:

"The Gore's soon began a PR blitz designed to show that they weren't prudish blacklists after all . . . Within two weeks, Al Gore had announced that he and Tipper used to smoke dope from time to time. Mrs. Gore told reporter after reporter about her devotion to Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead . . . 'I was one of the earliest Springsteen fans,' she told the *Washington Pos*' . . . 'I played the drums in high school . . . You're talking to someone who truly understands rock music' . . . ' In other words, we're not as uncool as we look. Really."

Carlson concludes that this tap dance was "pathetic, degrading, painful to watch. But ultimately it was effective." Al and Tipper convinced the smut merchants that they really don't object to kids listening to dirty lyrics, so long as the producers gave money to Democrats. This made them acceptable to Bill and Hillary, and the rest is history.

Now this stuff, both the legal and the public disingenuousness, would be small potatoes for Bill. But Al isn't Bill, and anyone who doubts this should watch the videotape of Al's now-infamous "no controlling legal authority" press conference. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights. He stammered, stuttered, and repeated his catch phrase interminably. And he sweated.

Three days after Al's debacle, Bill held a press conference, at which he ridiculously asserted that he didn't think that he had ever made similar phone calls from his White House office, but would not rule out the possibility. In short, he said, "I swear I didn't do it, but if you find out later that I did, so what?" It was a sterling performance. And he didn't break a sweat doing it. Not surprisingly, the American media and public not only bought his story hook, line, and sinker, but congratulated him for his straightforward and brave declarations.

In short, while a lack of principles is no big deal to the American public anymore, I don't think voters will take to the squirming and the sweating over it. Bill doesn't do it. Hillary doesn't. And guess what. Dick Gephardt doesn't either.

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