

The Political Forum

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

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AOL-TIME WARNER, MORAL CRUSADERS

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Like many Americans I read with interest last week a great deal of news and commentary on the big AOL-Time-Warner merger. Most of the reports were glowing, packed with promises of multiple new entertainment delights for the edification of people around the world. It was, one story said, a joining of the “old media” and the “new media” for a great “voyage into cyberspace.”

And why not, says I? Only an idiot wouldn't recognize the synergism between Looney Toons and CNN. After all, what does Wiley Coyote have on Wolf Blitzer? Or, for that matter, what does the Road Runner have on our Bill.

But it wasn't, I found out, simply that entertainment options and opportunities had expanded exponentially. The big shots at both companies announced that this merger had a strong moral dimension. AOL's Steve Case said it would “change the world,” that together these firms had “an unbelievable opportunity to really make a difference, not just in terms of the services people use but also in terms of the kind of impact we can have on society.”

Not to be outdone, Time-Warner's Chairman Gerald Levin announced that the merger was “about making a better world for people because we now have the technology and the instruments to do that.”

Frankly, I was ecstatic. It was just a matter of time, thought I, before the new firm would make a tender offer for the Episcopalians, and then there truly would be peace in the valley as the Carter family used to predict in song.

But then I called my good friend and former colleague Suzanne Harvey, who now runs the Social Investment Research Service (SIRS) at Thompson Financial, and she told me that AOL would become a “porn stock” if it merged with Time-Warner. In truth, she didn't actually say, “porn stock,” she said “adult entertainment stock,” but the idea's the same.

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She allowed as how Time-Warner has a penchant for dirty movies and records glorifying such things as brutal rape and cop killing, the kind of thing that some kids today have learned to appreciate under the tutelage of the modern “entertainment industry.” She said that a lot of individual investors, churches, groups that represent the interests of children, and “some women’s organizations” (not all, of course) frown upon investing in companies like Time-Warner.

I was crushed. “Tipper stopped all that,” I cried. “I sent \$10 of my lunch money to the ‘Gore for President’ campaign in 1991 because Tipper had taken a stand on this issue. I carry a picture of her in my wallet because of her brave fight, like people in the 15th century used to do with pictures of Joan of Arc. (I learned that last piece of arcana on the History Channel, where they showed an actual old film clip of one of Charles VII’s soldiers pulling a picture of Joan from his ditty bag.)

It isn’t true, of course, that I sent Al money and carry a picture of Tipper. And Suzanne knew it. She knew that I knew that Tipper and Al had folded like a cheap umbrella in a storm when the big record producers, including Warner, had summoned the two of them to a meeting in Los Angeles in late 1987, about the time Al was considering a presidential run, and told them to can their crusade against dirty lyrics. But what the heck. It was close to the truth, according to the new rules as outlined by Bill. I believed it was true when I said it.

It is possible, of course, that the new AOL-Time-Warner will, in fact, “make the world a better place by fighting social ills,” as the Reuters Business Wire put it in a January 11 story from which the above Levin and Case quotes were taken. It is possible that Warner will stop making and selling dirty movies and records that glorify violence, and that AOL will close those “chat rooms” that have become one of the principle cyber meeting places for the nation’s perverts.

As they say, anything is possible. After all, I read last week that Jane Fonda had become a born-again Christian and “moved to Chappaqua,” as the new expression goes for someone who leaves their spouse. (We used to call it “pulling a Hank Snow,” in honor of his great country hit, “Moving On,” but I must say that “moving to Chappaqua” has a nice ring to it also.)

One thing that Levin and Case said that I believe is absolutely true is that the new firm will indeed “change the world.” In fact, individually, there is little question that each, in its own way, has already done so. This is especially true, I believe, with Time-Warner, a firm that has a vast amount of pure political and social “Power,” power with a capital “P,” power to mold American society and power to greatly influence American politics.

Does anyone believe, for example, that Bill would be in the White House today if CNN were run by someone with more traditional views than those of Ted Turner, a self-described socialist, who once called his wife’s new found faith a “religion for losers,” ridiculed the Ten Commandments, and told a Polish joke about the Pope John Paul II?

Does anyone believe that Bill Clinton would be in the White House today if CNN and *Time Magazine* had been owned by a company run by people who believed that “character,” as traditionally defined, was an important leadership trait, and who also understood that a strong

and vigilant free press, a press that is alert to corruption and sleaze in high places, is one of the bulwarks of American freedom.

This isn't a new thought. It was a common notion among Englishman as far back as 1644 when Milton wrote the remarkable *Areopagitica*, which was delivered in support of freedom of the press before the famous Long Parliament, during the early days of the English civil war. Milton's plea to the Presbyterian majority was for the revocation of the order requiring the licensing of printing in England. It went as follows:

And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter.

Tocqueville also commented favorably several times on the importance of the roll of the press in keeping politicians honest, most directly when he said, 'It's [the press] eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion.'

I think CNN and *Time* could have run Bill out of town on a rail if they had been just half as aggressive in following the many leads about Clinton administration and Clinton family corruption as they were in reporting on the so-called "sleaze" factor in the Reagan administration. By not doing it, they "changed the world" all right, just as surely as they would have if they had done it.

And they could have done it honestly. They wouldn't have had to resort to the kind of sleazy, slipshod "investigative journalism" that led the two media giants to "prove" the blatantly false "Tailwind" story several years ago, the one about American Special Forces using poison gas to kill U.S. defectors in Laos during the Vietnam War.

But this is all speculation. As Whittier put it, "For all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" The following are two concrete examples of how Time-Warner's political power actually did "change the world." Readers can judge for themselves whether either changed it for the better. The first is from a September 17, 1997 article I wrote entitled, "To Err Is Human, To Sweat Over It In Public Is Gauche."

It was primarily through Tipper's efforts that the PMRC [Parents Music Resource Center] 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 L.A. 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 Post* . . . 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.

The second example is from an October 22, 1997 piece that I wrote entitled "Three Tales About Politics In America Today."

The FOB in this case is one Rick Kaplan. Dedicated readers may recall that Kaplan's name has appeared in this column on two previous occasions. In July, we noted his sleep-overs in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House ("Three Cheers for Bill," July 30, 1997), and in January, we commented on Kaplan's role, as the former producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*, in squelching network television coverage of various Clinton scandals ("Is the *New York Times* Being Duped by Right-Wing Nuts," January 15, 1997).

Recently, Kaplan left ABC to become president of CNN. But he isn't one to forget old friends, just because he moves up in the world. In fact, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, one of the first things he did upon arriving at his new post was to "raise a few eyebrows by telling CNN staffers to limit their use of the word 'scandal' in reporting on Clinton's campaign fund-raising woes." Scandal, it appears, was too subjective a term for a "serious" news organization such as CNN.

But true friendship, as the Duc de La Rochefoucauld pointed out, isn't a one way street. So, a few weeks later, according to the *Washington Post*, when CNN learned, during the week preceding Princess Diana's funeral, that BBC, "one of only two British organizations allowed to shoot the funeral and procession," had decided not to "share its video with American networks," Kaplan was able to enlist White House aid in remedying the situation.

The *Post* notes that White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry phoned British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and voila, "the conflict was soon ironed out." Needless to say, come Saturday, Kaplan's CNN carried the funeral proceedings in their entirety.

Oh the morality of it all! It brings tears to one's eyes, n'est pas? Pull back on the already limited "scandal" coverage and all sorts of good things can happen. To heck with Milton's plea that "truth be in the field."

Space doesn't permit a discussion of the more important way by which AOL-Time-Warner will "change the world," that being via the production of "news and entertainment" which advances the moral agenda of the leadership of the respective companies. But I would refer readers to an article I wrote dated June 18, 1997 and entitled "Keep The Faith Conservatives, And Support Your Local Humanities."

The article highlighted my friend Claes Ryn's belief that much of what goes on in America today can be explained not by politics, but by art, music, literature, television, movies and advertising; by the symbols that inspire and shape the public's imagination and its dreams for the future. With this in mind, I wrote the following.

Obvious examples include the Old Testament stories of Abraham, Ruth, Esther, Job, Jacob, David, Noah and of course, Adam and Eve, which have profoundly shaped the very nature of Western society. Erasmus' great satire, *Praise of Folly*, did as much to erode respect for the local hierarchy in the medieval church as did Luther's Ninety-Five Theses. Shakespeare and Milton changed the way the world thinks about conflict and love and honor and God. Voltaire and Rousseau can take as much responsibility for the French revolution, which changed the Western world forever, as the actions of Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette.

In more recent times, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also comes to mind. It had as much impact on the debate over slavery, and probably affected the resort to war, more than all of the debates in Congress combined. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* had enormous impact on the way millions of Americans viewed both the American labor movement and the early liberal agenda. Leon Uris' *Exodus* affected the attitude of untold Christian Americans toward the new state of Israel. And many of the most vociferous opponents of the death penalty still cite Camus' *Reflections on the Guillotine*, as having changed their lives.

How many Americans had their patriotism indelibly stamped onto their souls by reading Whittier's popular poem, *Barbara Frietchie*, ("Shoot, if you must this old gray head, But spare your country's flag" she said"); or Longfellow's *The Building of the Ship*, ("Thou, too, sail on, O ship of state! Sail on, O Union, strong and great! Humanity with all its fears, With all the hopes of future years, Is hanging breathless on they fate!"); or Scott's *Love of Country*, ("Breathes there the man with soul so dead Who never to himself has said: 'This is my own, my native land'?")?

How many young girls learned that sexual restraint was noble and good from reading Emily Dickinson's *The Charm*?

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld--
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled--

But peers beyond her mesh--
And wishes--and denies--
Lest Interview--annul a want
that Image--satisfies--

Or from reading Dickinson's letters to Otis Lord. "Oh, my too beloved, save me from the idolatry which would crush us both . . . Don't you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer--don't you know that 'no' is the wisest word we consign to Language? The 'Stile' is God's--My Sweet One--for your great sake--not mine--I will not let you cross--but it is all yours, and when it is right I will lift the Bars, and lay you in the Moss. . . . It is Anguish I long conceal from you to let you leave me, hungry, but you ask the divine Crust and that would doom the Bread."

Is it any wonder then, that those who would deconstruct American society, who hate its Judeo-Christian morality and its century's old cultural habits and customs, have focused their attack on the traditional literary canon? As T.S. Eliot observed, "the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living."

So the question is this: what will the literary cannon of the future teach us and our children? Time will tell, of course. But two things are certain. AOL-Time-Warner and the men who run that company will have a lot to say about it. And whatever they decide will indeed "change the world."

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