

# The Political Forum

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

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### AI'S PROGRESS

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I thoroughly enjoyed the Democratic convention last week, as I did the GOP convention two weeks earlier. I enjoyed them for different reasons, of course. As I wrote following the Republican bash, there is, for me at least, "something wonderful about seeing a huge roomful of people, from all over the United States, celebrating the importance of individual responsibility, limited government, the work ethic, respect for the law, long-established American customs and mores, patriotism, and traditional religious and family values."

I enjoyed the Democratic convention because it was, in my opinion, such wonderful theater, providing what I would argue could only be regarded as an award-winning production of a brilliant drama that skillfully combined one of the most wonderful forms of Western literature, the Christian allegory, with generous amounts of two great literary devices, irony and parody.

The script was clearly modeled on the works of Bunyan and Dante. The irony begins immediately, when the scene opens in a place called the "City of Angels." This is, of course, a play on Buynan's "City of Destruction," being, after all, most famous not for its celestial spirits but as home to the world's wealthiest and gaudiest producers and peddlers of graphic violence and smut.

Very few of these powerful "entertainment" moguls, and the "stars" that work for them, ever actually appear on center stage in the play, most being considered much too unsavory for the general public, which is watching it all on television. But they lurk in the shadows behind the actors, orchestrating events, prompting, and welcoming each as he or she exits the stage. They are also sprinkled throughout the audience, which clearly adores each and every one of them.

Dante's influence is immediately evidenced by a constant off-stage din, consisting of angry shouts, cries, curses, and screams from what in contemporary times are called "demonstrators," but whom Dante would have described as "The Furies," "The Wrathful," "the accursed," and the "miserable race" who have "lost the good of intellect" and whose "fears have changed to desire."

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In addition, the televised scenes outside the theater are veritable reproductions of Blake's great illustrations of the *Commedia*.

There is much irony in this, since these angry souls are, in fact, the political offspring of the actors and the audience inside, all of whom, nevertheless, pretend they are not there. Yet, sounds of clubs bashing against soft skulls, teeth gnashing, wailing, weeping, and tear gas bombs exploding are a constant reminder to all inside the theater of the wages of their past politics, and the probable costs of their current ventures. Even more ironic is the fact that the police, who protect the audience and the actors from the angry fruit of their political loins, are vilified and despised by all.

The ostensible hero of this play is a Pilgrim named Al Gore, who, like Dante at the beginning of the *Commedia*, is "midway the path of life that men pursue," and has found himself, "in darkling wood astray."

This is, of course, a nice way of saying that he has hung too long with, from Bunyan now, "Mr. Self-will" (played by Bill Clinton) and his friends, a rough crowd of small town shysters, sharpies, flibbertigibbets and fly-by-nighters, savings and loan robbers, international thieves and schemers, impoverished Buddhist nuns with big checkbooks, Chinese spies, crooked arms dealers, dope peddlers, union plug-ugly's, commodity market crooks, harridans, harpies, perjurers, liars, corrupt real estate magnets, and porn peddlers.

As in any good Christian allegory, there is hope for the Pilgrim in the form of, once again borrowing from Bunyan, "Mr. Honest," played by Senator Joseph Lieberman, who, in this play, the Pilgrim has personally chosen to help him escape from the "Slough of Despond" in which he finds himself.

There are myriad other characters in the play who appear directly out of the works of Dante and Bunyan. From Bunyan, we find ample numbers of those who try to impede the Pilgrim's progress, including Lord Hategood, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Mr. Ignorance, Mr. Talkative, Mr. Atheist, and, of course, Mr. By-ends, who "had always the luck to jump in my judgment with the present way of the time, whatever it was." In addition, virtually all of the merchants from the fair in the town of Vanity make their appearance, hawking "lusts, pleasures and delights of all sorts."

We also witness a seemingly endless stream of individuals who appear to have come directly out of the *Commedia*, rising from the mire to speak in support of one or more varieties of what Dante and Bunyan would have considered vice. The vices of Ciacco are represented, as well as those of such wonderful characters as Filippo Argenti, Farinata, Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, Capaneus, and yes, Brunetto Latini.

An aficionado of Dante would have had only one complaint, that being that Mr. Self-will's friend Monica wasn't on hand to play one of Dante's most famous characters, Francesca da Rimini, who Dante finds in the second circle of Hell, the one reserved for the lustful. Monica would have, I believe, been perfect for the part. And the audience, I believe, would have loved her.

Then she said to me: "the bitterest woe of woes  
is to remember in our wretchedness

Old happy times: and this thy doctor knows;

Yet, if so dear desire thy heart possess  
To know that root of love which wrought our fall,  
I'll be as those who weep and who confess.

One day we read for pastime how in thrall  
Lord Lancelot lay to love, who loved the Queen;  
We were alone-we thought no harm at all.

As we read on, our eyes met now and then,  
And to our cheeks the changing colour started  
. . . . we read no more that day.

The tension in the play occurs as a result of soliloquies by both Mr. Honest and Mr. Self-will, each having, in effect, an opportunity to draw Pilgrim down his particular path.

The parody occurs when it becomes apparent during these two speeches that Dante and Bunyan are about to be stood on their head, so to speak; that Mr. Honest is going to lose the battle for Pilgrim's soul; that his "goodness" is no match for the racism and class envy that has grown in the damp shade of Mr. Self-will's shadow; that Pilgrim is still strongly under the influence of Mr. Self-will and his admirers, most of whom despise most of what Mr. Honest believes.

In fact, it soon becomes clear that the real hero of the play is not Pilgrim after all, but Mr. Self-will, whom everyone involved in the production, audience and cast included, adore and idolize, much more than they do the Pilgrim himself.

Mr. Self-will's speech is, in fact, a doozy. Virtually everyone agrees that it is the highlight of the play. He has, he says, provided riches beyond dreams of avarice to all of them, and he assures listeners that if the Pilgrim follows in his footsteps, they will become even wealthier. The crowd goes wild.

He is so confident of their love for him that he even praises Mr. Honest in effusive terms, which gains him many kudos, since everyone remembers Mr. Honest's base charge a few years earlier that he, Mr. Self-will, had "weakened the great power and strength" of the presidency, by engaging in behavior that was "not just inappropriate," but "immoral."

Mr. Self-will doesn't even try to defend his ethics and morals. He realizes, whether Mr. Honest knows it or not, that the audience and the other players don't care one wit about his so-called "character flaws."

And in any case, he had already addressed the topic a few days earlier in a daring parody on the whole concept of forgiveness, saying, in effect, that he knew that he had done wrong; that he felt badly about it; and that he had forgiven himself for it. He summed it up, in a phrase that would have done any of Dante's characters proud, by saying that the whole thing had turned out to be a pretty good experience after all.

So I wake up every day with this overwhelming sense of gratitude because it may be that if I hadn't been knocked down in the way I was and forced to come to grips with what I'd done and the consequences of it, in such an awful way, I might never had had to really deal with it 100 percent.

He made no mention, of course, of those individuals who were harmed by his transgressions, or whether they had granted him the forgiveness that he had granted himself.

In contrast, Mr. Honest's speech was a real downer. For starters, he actually repeated and endorsed virtually all of the arguments Mr. Self-will made on his own behalf. And, despite the fact that his role in the play was to represent integrity, he made no attempt to challenge the two moral heresies that Mr. Self-will used to justify his moral and ethical sloth, namely, that the end justifies the means, and that one's moral worth is, in Mr. Self-will's own words, demonstrated "most effectively" not by what you do in your personal life but by "what you fight for and for whom you fight."

Frankly, I couldn't help but think that the play would have been much more exciting had Mr. Honest openly challenged this line of reasoning. In fact, I would have preferred that he follow Bunyan's script more closely, and, for example, excoriated Mr. Self-will's well-known protestation that one of his most notorious moral transgressions was not specifically listed in the scriptures as a sin, and that it therefore must have been okay. Something along these lines:

Mr. Honest. He [Mr. Self-will] said, To have to do with other men's wives had been practiced by David, God's beloved; and therefore he could do it. He said, To have more women than one, was a thing that Solomon practiced; and therefore he could do it. He said, That Sarah and the godly midwives of Egypt lied, and so did Rahab; and therefore he could do it. He said, That the disciples went at the bidding of their Master, and took away the owner's ass; and therefore he could do so too. He said, That Jacob got the inheritance of his father in the way of guile and dissimulation; and therefore he could do so too.

Great-Heart. Highly base, indeed! And you are sure he was of this opinion?

Mr. Honest. I have heard him plead for it, bring Scripture for it, bring argument for it, etc.

Great-Heart. An opinion that is not fit to be with any allowance in the world.

Mr. Honest. You must understand me right. He did not say that any man might do this; but that those that had the virtues of those that did such things, might also do the same.

Great-Heart. But what more false than such a conclusion? for this is as much as to say, that because good men heretofore have sinned of infirmity, therefore he had allowance to do it of a presumptuous mind . . . who could have thought that any one could so far have been blinded by the power of lust?

But no such speech was given by Mr. Honest. Indeed, he made no mention of his prior abhorrence of either Mr. Self-will's lust or his unlawful behavior. He didn't even argue in favor

of school choice, partial privatization of Social Security, tort reform, capital gains tax cuts, or placing some checks on affirmative action, even though it was his position on these issues that gave him the reputation for integrity that Pilgrim said he so valued.

In the end, Mr. Honest basically threw in the towel completely by proclaiming that he liked Pilgrim just the way he was. His exact words were.

I've known him for 15 years. I have not met a more honorable, intelligent, hard-working, progressive person in public life in America than Al Gore.

Now, I would admit that Al isn't nearly as morally and ethically challenged as Mr. Self-will. But it is also unarguable that Al wouldn't have needed the help of Mr. Honest if he hadn't soiled himself pretty badly during his eight-year long partnership with his profligate friend. In fact, Al's political handlers made no secret of the fact that the principal reason the Senator had been chosen was their hope that a little of his reputation for integrity would rub off on Al, who, they seemed ready to admit, needed it.

So why did Mr. Honest proclaim his belief that there was no need for Al to change his ways? To quote Willie Nelson's great song, "Poncho and Lefty," "out of kindness, I suppose."

In any case, I don't want to carry my criticism of this play too far. As I said earlier, I liked it very much. And moreover, this small defect was, in my opinion, more than made up for by the remarkable twist at the end of the production that rivals, I believe, for pure literary imagination and allegorical style, anything that either Dante or Bunyan ever wrote.

I am referring, of course, to Pilgrim's declaration in his play-ending soliloquy that the lesson he had learned from his eight-year journey with Mr. Self-will was not that he should follow Mr. Honest down the well-known path laid out centuries earlier by other good men and true, bounded on each side by religious beliefs and respect for the law.

No, he said, what he had learned was that he should "be his own man," a seemingly innocuous declaration but one that such men as Dante or Bunyan would surely have regarded as one of the greatest of all moral transgressions. Indeed, it is precisely the same one that led to Mr. Self-will's downfall.

They would surely have argued that rather than "being his own man," Al should follow the beacon that had guided Mr. Honest throughout his life. For content, quality of production, and acting, I give it Four Stars. \*\*\*\*

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