

# The Political Forum

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

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### SOME THOUGHTS ON THE GOP CONVENTION

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I thoroughly enjoyed the GOP convention last week, as I always do. I think there is just 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.

Granted, not all the people in that room were true believers in each of these bed-rock principles of the American republic. But I have no doubt that many of them were, and it is, for me at least, a comfort to be reminded, every four years, that they are out there in the towns and cities across America fighting the good fight to restore some dignity to the White House, some restraints on the government Leviathan, and some sense of tradition, both religious and secular, to the public square.

I like to think of these people as 21st century America's version of Plato's, Isaiah's, and Matthew Arnold's "remnant," the word all three of these scholars used to describe a small, but select, group of people on whose shoulders, each believed, rested the hope for a better society.

Plato's remnant was made up of men whom he described as "worthy disciples of philosophy," who had "seen enough of the madness of the multitude . . . who will not join in the wickedness of his fellows." Isaiah's remnant was a contingent of devout Israelites who, God assured the prophet, would survive the destruction of their nation at the hands of Assyria. Arnold's remnant consisted of the "intelligent minority" who he hoped would save the U.S. from "the unsound majority."

Needless to say, now that the fun in Philadelphia is over, members of the modern-day remnant face a long, difficult battle, one that will no end with the victory of George W. Bush. A Bush win would, of course, be a giant step in the right direction for them, mostly because it would deny the opposition an important platform. But as T.S. Eliot once noted, there are no lost causes

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because there are no gained causes, "generation after generation, the same battles are fought again and again."

Besides pleasing me, I believe that the GOP convention put genuine fear in the hearts of the Democrats for the first time since the race began last winter. I couldn't prove this, of course. But I think Bill is the one to watch for clues. He's their most astute politician, and he wears his emotions on his sleeve. Last week, he started looking and acting, to me at least, like a very troubled man.

In addition to launching what could only be described, in my opinion, as a petulant attack on Bush, Bill couldn't stop himself from whining about Mrs. Clinton's bad showing in the polls. In a Fox News interview he said: "Everybody that always hated me all those years and were so mean to me, they've all transferred all their anger to her now. It's almost as if they've got one last chance to beat me."

Were so mean to me? People dislike Hillary solely because they don't like Bill, as if people couldn't find ample reasons, unrelated to him, to dislike her? I don't know whether this is evidence, as Dick Morris maintained, that Bill is "becoming unhinged." But frankly, I don't think this is the kind of thing an optimistic, untroubled Bill would say.

The polls obviously have something to do with Bill's apparent anxieties. But the polls have been rotten for Democrats for a long time, and it hasn't seemed to bother him. Prior to last week, I think Bill, and most Democrats for that matter, were pretty firmly convinced, regardless of the polls, that Al was a shoo-in against Bush. Al, after all, is well known, handsome, articulate, intelligent, has a tremendous amount of experience, and is a key figure in a government that has provided eight years of strong economic growth under a president whose approval ratings have been consistently in the high 50s, and sometimes higher.

As for the scandals that have engulfed Bill and soiled Al, I think Democrats believed, with considerable reason I might add, that a large majority of Americans simply don't care anymore about stale old homilies about morals and ethics. And I think they viewed Bush as a young upstart, with awkward mannerisms, whose sole claims to fame are, as Bill said last week, that his "daddy was president" and he had "owned a baseball team."

As I said above, I think this attitude changed last week as a direct result of a variety of things that happened at the GOP convention.

For openers, public reaction to Bush's choice of Dick Cheney as his running mate didn't turn out the way Democrats had expected. Wonder of wonders, people like him. Bush's polls went up, dramatically even, on the announcement. And when Democrats tried to remedy this problem by trashing the former White House Chief-of-Staff, Congressman, Defense Secretary, and President of a Fortune 500 company, they found that it didn't seem to help, and might have even hurt.

Calling attention to Cheney's voting record umpteen years ago simply called attention to similar votes that leading Democrats, including Al, made at the same time. Worse, the steady stream of Democratic charges that Cheney is a hard-core right-winger had the effect of solidifying Bush's

base among conservatives, many of whom weren't sure they liked either him or Cheney prior to the deluge.

A second convention factor that, I believe, has to be troubling to Democrats is the fact that the GOP has attracted to its ranks a very impressive number of accomplished, articulate, and highly respected African-Americans. To win, Al needs overwhelming, I repeat, overwhelming support from the black community, which could be threatened by the presence on the GOP stump of such attractive individuals as Congressman J.C. Watts (Okla.), Colin Powell, who would likely to be Bush's Secretary of State, and Condoleezza Rice, who most certainly would be his National Security Advisor.

To fight back, Al will need a lot of help from prominent black Democrats. The problem with this is, in my opinion, that the two best known, most visible, most prominent African-Americans spokesmen for the Democratic party today are the Reverends Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, neither of whom, in my opinion, are likely to appeal strongly to that segment of the black community that is impressed by individuals like Watts, Powell, and Rice.

Thirdly, I believe that Democrats can't help but be bothered by the fact that there was no fight at the GOP convention over the abortion issue. For years, it has been an article of faith among Democrats that their adamant, pro-choice stance was a big winner for them, and would become even more so in the future as the nation become less religious and as women became increasingly important as a voting block. As a result, they reveled in the fights within the GOP between the hard-core pro-lifers and Republicans who said the issue was a huge loser for them.

But last week, no such fight occurred. And if one paid close attention, it became evident that this wasn't simply because Bush operatives had muzzled the party's pro-choice forces. It also appeared to have had something to do with the fact that Republican strategists are finding that the issue may be starting to cut their way.

Can't happen, you say? Well maybe not. But understand that the abortion controversy, from a political standpoint, is not about those people for whom abortion is the most important political issue of all time, the 20% or so on each side of the controversy who are either unreservedly committed to banning all abortions or equally adamant about having no restrictions whatsoever placed on a woman's "right to choose." It is about the 55% to 60% of Americans who are generally comfortable with the law the way it is, meaning they don't want abortions banned entirely, but believe that reasonable restrictions on the procedure are not only acceptable, but proper.

For years, most polls indicated that a majority of this large, middle group was of the opinion that the pro-life people were the extremists, and leaned against them when it came to voting on the issue. After all, no one likes "the nuts on the fringe." Today there are signs that this attitude may have shifted somewhat, that the Democratic party's absolute refusal to bend at all on the partial birth abortion issue has convinced many people in the middle that the pro-choicers are now the extremists. What, they wonder, would be wrong with banning a procedure that is so patently gruesome, especially as the pro-choice community itself maintains, one that is so seldom used?

Time will tell whether there has indeed been a shift in voter attitudes on this issue, as many Republicans now believe. Much, I would suppose, will depend on the skill with which the candidates present their positions. And in my opinion, Al isn't doing a very good job of portraying his side as the "moderates." Several weeks ago, he told NBC's Tim Russert that he didn't believe life began at conception, but when asked when he thought it did begin, he was incapable of giving a straight answer.

Then Russert really threw Al for a loop when he asked him whether he believed that the "right to choose" was so sacrosanct that it should be extended to a pregnant woman who is condemned to die. This completely flummoxed Al. In fact, he could not give any answer at all. He said he'd have to "think about it." The next day he declared that "the right to choose" could not be compromised even in such a situation as this one. Yes, he said, the woman could choose to die before the birth of her child.

Another aspect of the GOP convention that I believe must have Democrats worried is the fact that Republicans seemed, if the polls are any indication, to have made some political hay out of Bill and Al's ethical and moral transgressions.

From the Democratic perspective, such complaints are not supposed to work. Americans don't care today if their politicians are moral or honest in some old-fashioned, traditional sense. Do they? They especially don't care about such things when times are good. Right? In fact, not only do they not care, they actually are put off by those intolerant, religious fanatics who do care. Hasn't this been proven time and again?

Wasn't it proved when Bill's polls remained high even after he admitted that he lied about having sex with an intern in the oval office and then lied about it under oath? Wasn't it proved, more recently, by the fact that no one seems at all interested in the amazing incongruities in Al's sworn testimony on his fund-raising efforts among impoverished Buddhist monks?

Well maybe. But maybe not. Maybe a lot of Americans just didn't like the strident way in which Republicans presented their concerns. Maybe they might react differently if the message is delivered by a nice young man from Texas; a man with a solid marriage to a traditional kind of wife, a librarian in fact, who has never made a dime in the cattle futures market; a man who doesn't rail against either the sin or the sinner, but simply presents himself as a man of faith who offers the attractive alternative of an administration that will not shame the office of presidency. What if this approach works on a large number of "undecideds" in what promises to be a very close race? Wouldn't such a possibility make Democrats worry? I, for one, think it would.

The bottom line on all of this is, as I stated in my "Fearless Forecast" piece last December, I believe that George W. Bush will be the next President. And as I indicated above, I think this is a good thing, especially when one considers the alternative.

But to avoid closing on such a happy note, I would like to add a caveat, one that I explored in an October 27, 1999 piece entitled "Some Old, Dead Guys Reflect On Modern Politics." That is that I am more than a bit uneasy about Bush's "compassionate conservative" slogan. In fact, I don't like it at all. And I wonder how traditional conservatives, who have fought the good fight

for so many years against the false compassion of modern day liberalism, could bring themselves to rally behind such shallow sloganeering.

Is there no program that the liberals created during the past 60 years that “compassionate conservatives” believe could use a little trimming? Should the entire government be fully funded each year at their prior year level and then some? Should lots of new programs be added? That’s what it sounded like to me last week. Are all the departments, branches, divisions, offices, and bureaus necessary and useful? If not, which aren’t?

This may sound like a nit-picking question during a time when the government is flush with money. But these questions aren’t entirely about money. They are about my belief that the problem with big government isn’t simply that wastes a lot, but that it is also pernicious and destructive of traditional society with its emphasis on family, individual responsibility, and religious faith.

In my opinion, if “compassionate conservatism” means support for bigger and bigger government, then it is neither compassionate nor conservative.

I’ll write more on this as the campaign develops. In the meantime, color me happy that George and Dick are winning, and extremely skeptical that their victory will retire the need for the remnant.

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