

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 CHANGE

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Late last year, a favorite topic of social commentators and editorial writers was the remarkable change that had occurred during the closing years of the 20th century. The fall of Communism in Russia, the reunification of Europe, the "globalization" of commerce, and the extraordinary pace of technological advancement led everyone's list of examples of this phenomenon.

Other, less publicized, but, in my opinion, equally profound shifts also came to pass during this period. Among other things, certain assumptions, which a few years ago would have been considered self evident by most political operatives on both sides of the aisle, entered the dustbin of history.

Among these was the belief that the American public simply wouldn't tolerate a president who committed adultery with a White House intern young enough to be his daughter, and then perjured himself when questioned about it.

Another was the belief that the American public simply wouldn't tolerate the routine use of U.S. air power against third world nations by a president for the purpose of deflecting attention away from embarrassing revelations about his extramarital affairs.

In addition, a host of traditional taboos, some of which had been a part of America's social fabric since the Pilgrims landed, slowly faded away in favor of an entirely new list. One example of this, my good friend Joe always offers, is the following question: "If at a large wedding reception, a gay couple is holding hands and kissing and a straight couple is sharing a cigarette, which pair will be considered gauche?"

Each day, these and other changes in American life rush into one's consciousness in various ways. A week ago, a friend demonstrated his newly purchased Palm VII for me, which truly is an incredible device. Ten years ago few people would have thought that for a few hundred dollars a person could buy a hand-held instrument run by two little batteries that would instantly

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On another front, I read in the newspapers recently that two six-year-old boys in some town in New Jersey had been suspended from kindergarten for three days for pointing their fingers at each other and saying, "Bang!" Probably, I figure, they should have been busy learning how to put a condom on a banana.

One major change that, as far as I can tell, has gone almost entirely unnoticed by the political establishment, the press, and most Americans is the fact that the virtual elimination of endemic poverty in America, the significant improvement of working conditions in factories and mines, and the dismal performance of socialist economies around the globe has all but eliminated the traditional intellectual argument for socialism in the United States.

In the first half of the century, America's intellectual leftist establishment was an enormously powerful force in the nation's political, cultural, and social life. Today it is, for all practical purposes, non-existent.

Taking its place on the front lines of the American leftist movement is a powerful new hodgepodge of "celebrities" from the world of "journalism," "entertainment," and the political talk-shows on TV, most of whom wouldn't recognize the phrase "dialectical materialism" if they heard it, much less be able to use it in a sentence.

But they make up for their lack of intellectual grounding and practical arguments for their agenda, with highly proficient application of modern propaganda techniques, including what I call the "terrible swift sword of political correctness;" highly effective use of the influence of their celebrity status; grand public displays of their "compassion" for various trendy "causes;" and the routine creation of what the leftist revolutionary Georges Sorel once described as "social myths," which are roughly defined as invalid ideas, effective to set the masses in motion.

A modern example of the one of these "social myths" is, I believe, Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton's constant reference to her political efforts on behalf of "the children," which creates the idea that vast numbers of America's kids are somehow going hungry, or worse, because the government isn't doing enough. Yet there is little if any evidence, in my opinion, that American's children are deprived anything due to the lack of government programs.

That this myth has power was demonstrated not too long ago when Jane Fonda publicly expressed her outrage over the "starving children" in Georgia. When someone explained to her that there were no starving children in Georgia, she seemed surprised.

Enhancing the effectiveness of these propaganda tools, in my opinion, has been some dramatic changes in the nation's public education system; changes that have been developed and implemented by a bastion of the left wing establishment, the nation's teachers' unions and the U.S. Department of Education.

By systematically emphasizing superficial information over knowledge, fads over tradition, faddish bromides over truth, social platitudes over history, large numbers of Americans have, I

believe, been denied the means to think beyond the images they see on television and in the movies, images over which the left has considerable control.

This change in the nature of the American left is, I think, illustrated best by the fact that one of the movement's quintessential leaders today is, without question, Mrs. Clinton.

This is a woman who is, I would argue, almost painfully a bourgeois WASP, with her highly-mortgaged home in just the "right" white suburb; her Methodist homilies; her regularly updated "look"; her enthusiastic support for myriad middle class entitlements; her endorsement of the death penalty; her sleazy real-estate and cattle deals for paltry gains; her evident empathy for the race-baiting Reverend Al Sharpton; and her decidedly low comfort level with the New York Jewish community. Emma Goldman, Hillary ain't.

Nevertheless, despite these and other changes in American social, political and economic affairs, if one digs deeply enough into the under currents of society, one recognizes that some things never change. One of these is, of course, the struggle between good and evil, a conflict that, as I understand it, began here on earth with an incident in a garden many millennium ago involving a young couple, a snake and an apple.

Despite being commonplace in all societies and all times, this ancient struggle is eternally fascinating, and is made even more so by the fact that evil isn't always easily identified, but often appears, as portrayed in those old medieval Christian wood cuts, as a figure cloaked in the garb of love and kindness.

This is, I think, particularly true in American politics today, when the dominant political battlefields have changed from the usual, mundane matters related to economics and national defense, to a contest over which "celebrity" politician has the most "compassionate" plan for throwing the most federal funds at some "problem" that has little if any chance of being ameliorated by money.

The whole thing reminds me of the wonderful short book on the nature of evil by the turn-of-the-century Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, entitled *War, Progress and the End of History*.

Like so many of Washington's illustrious politicians on both sides of the aisle today, some of whom are in the highest public offices of the land, Solovyov's evil one "believed in God, but in the depths of his soul he involuntarily and unconsciously preferred himself. He believed in Good, but the All Seeing Eye of the Eternal knew that this man would bow down before the power of Evil as soon as it would offer him a bribe--not by deception of the senses and the lower passions, not even by the superior bait of power, but only by his own immeasurable self love."

Another thing that has remained amazingly constant throughout the 20th century is the left's ceaseless battle to expand the role and the power of the central government.

As I said earlier, the issues that stir the blood of America's liberals have changed dramatically in recent years, concentrated as they are today on the sensate concerns of various, middle class constituency groups. But the Gnostic impulse that drives the liberal agenda, whatever it may be, hasn't, in my opinion, changed one iota since the heyday of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas.

Support for this statement can be found in a variety of sources. But I think Max Eastman's timeless phrase, "yearning to do good and obsessed by the power of the state to do it," best describes the force that has driven the left in America since it began to gain serious power and influence in the aftermath of World War I.

Eastman was an early American socialist, a big fan of Lenin and the Russian revolution, who saw the light in the late 1930s, and began lecturing and writing about the evils of the system he had once admired. Having witnessed first hand the birth of the Communist state in Russia, he warned Americans that high minded, noble intentions to "make the world a better place" can quickly turn into a totalitarian nightmare.

Anti-establishment idealism eventually turns into an obsession for accumulating political power, Eastman warned, since only through such power can the beneficent goal be met. In terms that, I believe, fit the Clinton inner circle to a tee, Eastman put it this way.

Their early ideals had made spiritual rebels of them in their own country. They were commonly not only against the government and the "vested interests," but in a condition at least of mild demur against the whole established hierarchy of persons and values. To the "thinking mind," this was valid and exciting, but to mere organic tissue it was a hard attitude to keep up for a lifetime.

Power was necessary. And completing the circle, Eastman noted that the nobleness of the goal allowed the young idealists to "identify themselves with power without feeling guilty."

The trouble, Eastman warned, is that the importance of the end, the "yearning" for power in order to do "good," quickly begins to justify the means for attaining power. He noted Lenin's admonition to his followers: "We must be ready to employ trickery, deceit, law-breaking, withholding and concealing truth."

Lest this narrative seem remote from modern times, it might be remembered that following his successful reelection bid, Bill attempted to explain the illegalities and irregularities connected with his fund raising efforts during the campaign as being "necessary" because that which he wanted to accomplish in his second term was "so important."

Once gained, Eastman notes, power becomes corrupting, especially when gained through corrupt means. The argument is made that eggs must be broken to the make an omelet. What difference does it make if the basic freedoms and the human rights of some people are sacrificed if the result is a "better world?"

Finally, Eastman warns, that the use of the vast power of government for grand and "noble" social engineering schemes inevitably results in "destroying in the name of social welfare the foundations of freedom."

This warning has been echoed by some of the world's greatest economists, men like Ludwig Von Mises and Frederick Hayek; by some of America's most brilliant philosophers, men like Eric

Voegelin and Alasdair MacIntyre; and by some of America's most astute political observers, men like Irving Babbitt, Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, Irving Kristol, and Thomas Sowell.

But more often than not, these warnings have been met by the argument that, "It couldn't happen here." Here, in the United States, the argument goes, the roots of freedom are too deep to be disturbed by a few liberal "idealists," with their grand plans to create a more perfect society. The American public simply wouldn't tolerate it, we're told.

Here in the United States, noble, liberal goals are met gradually with no harm to freedom. And even if such freedom is tweaked a little, so what? After all, these goals are important. And the freedoms tweaked are inevitably those of people who have enjoyed the fruits of such freedom perhaps too well. People who, in addition, almost certainly don't share the noble goals.

Here in the United States, there is no danger that jackboots will be allowed to force the utopian dreams of the liberals on Americans at the expense of freedom. The American public simply wouldn't tolerate it, we're told.

Yet, just last week, Americans tolerated a situation in which 130 heavily armed men in black, in the early morning hours, knocked down the door of a citizen who had dared to spar with the federal government over a parental custody case that had drawn the personal attention of the nation's Attorney General. The legal fight hadn't been concluded in the courts, but Ms. Reno lost her patience. And besides, her goal was noble. She wanted to "protect the child."

The kid wasn't going anywhere, of course, anymore than the kids in Waco were going anywhere when she lost her patience and "protected" them. And there was no evidence that the boy was being mistreated. He was regularly seen happily playing in the yard. But Janet got tired of waiting, and Bill wasn't about to argue with the lady who is sitting on seven years of Justice Department files on virtually every member of the team Clinton, including Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton. So get your automatic weapons boys, we're goin' in.

I don't like the way liberals throw around terms like "jackboots" and "Gestapo" every time a cop who happens to be working a city run by a Republican mayor kills someone. But the pictures from Miami sure looked like a scene from the History Channel to me.

And I must say I gained small comfort from INS chief Doris Meissner's explanation of why Elian needn't have been so frightened. After all, she said, the little man with the big gun who first encountered Elian didn't actually point it directly in the boy's face, but downward, and didn't even have his finger on the trigger. As Lord Acton put it, "The strong man with the dagger is followed by the weaker man with the sponge."

In any case, the Clinton presidency will be over soon. And one can hope that the American public won't tolerate any further attempts by the new crowd to sacrifice America freedom upon the altar of utopian dreams of "making the world a better place." But I wouldn't count on it.

It is worth remembering in this context that early in Bill's first term, Mrs. Clinton, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, said that one of the reasons she was so excited at being in

the White House was because it might help her realize her long-held “burning desire to make the world around me--kind of going out in concentric circles--better for everybody.”

And, whether Max Eastman, or me, or you for that matter, like it or not, judging by the polls, a substantial number of Americans wish her well in this endeavor, and would presumably be willing to tolerate a considerable number of affronts to freedom in order to accomplish it.

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