

The Political Forum

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

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KEEP THE FAITH CONSERVATIVES, AND SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL HUMANITIES DEPARTMENT

Mark L. Melcher

For starters this week, let me just say that I agree with what appears to be the consensus among political pundits of all stripes that the Republican congressional leadership can be pretty stupid at times, and that last week's effort by them to add two unrelated riders to the disaster relief bill was one of those times. I also agree that Senator Trent Lott (R., Tex.) leaves a lot to be desired as Majority Leader for the conservative cause.

But I don't think that this means that the tide has turned against the GOP, as many conservative doomsayers and many jubilant Democrats seem to believe. Republicans who constantly whine that their leaders are losing the war in Washington because they get beat up every now and then are, I think, underestimating the difficulty of the fight and the strength of the foe.

I think they fail to understand that the party that controls the White House is going to win a few battles. That's just the way it works. This is especially true when the president sitting in that White House commands a 55% to 65% approval rating, just happens to be among the greatest spin artists of all times, and has the support of all three major news networks and CNN in virtually every battle he fights over policy.

Yes, the Democrats have taken it on the chin in recent years in a number of major political fights over such important issues as national health insurance, welfare reform, abortion policy, and federal spending levels. But as I said a few weeks ago in a piece entitled "What Victory Looks Like," this doesn't mean that they are on the ropes. The truth is that the liberal establishment in this nation is still enormously influential.

In fact, liberals wield what is easily one of the most powerful political weapons ever devised by man, namely the terrible swift sword of political correctness. This actualization of Orwell's "Thought Police" is a weapon that has proven to be the equal of reason in battle after battle over everything from environmental and race issues to defense policy.

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Anyone who doesn't believe this should pay a little attention to the job political correctness has done, and continues to do, on the U.S. armed forces, one of the principal targets of liberal hatred since the 1960s. Turning the top brass of the greatest military machine the world has ever known into a sniveling bunch of politically correct pansies is no small feat. But political correctness has pretty much succeeded in doing it, as the recent fight over "adultery" in the officer corps has demonstrated.

The good news is that, as I said in that aforementioned "Victory" piece, little by little, Republicans are making gains against an opponent that not long ago was so firmly entrenched in the White House and in both Houses of Congress that most observers thought that the GOP had become a permanent minority party.

As regular readers know, I don't usually offer paeans to politicians, individually or collectively. But it is worth remembering I believe, when ruminating on this situation, that Newt Gingrich was one of the few Republicans who never believed that his party was forever doomed to minority status.

His colleagues told him he was a dreamer, but he single-handedly went after the politically formidable Speaker of the House Jim Wright of Texas on corruption charges and brought him down. Then he went after control of the House, when almost everyone told him it couldn't be done. And he won again.

More recently, he survived one of the most vicious political attacks in history; one that would have destroyed any other politician in the nation; one that was supported not by just Democrats and by the entire mainstream media, but by many, many members of his own party. Now he's back at the front, bloody but still unbowed, and once again he's being fragged from the rear by his own troops, whining about the fact that he loses one now and then. Give me a break, as the kids say. Who pray tell, out of that group of Washington clowns that is criticizing him, could do better against the combined forces of Bill Clinton and his enormous cadre of taxpayer-financed public relations hacks and a fawning mainstream media.

I started thinking about all of this last week, not only because of all the Republican teeth gnashing over the disastrous GOP handling of the disaster relief bill, but also because of the many stories I have read recently in various publications positing the view that recent gains by socialists in the French and British elections presage a leftward swing in U.S. politics.

The story that really caught my eye was an amazingly confused article in the May 29, *Wall Street Journal* by one Hilary Stout, which featured a headline that said "Clinton and Blair Spotlight Move In West To Left."

Now I agree that England moved solidly leftward when it elected Tony Blair. But I was astounded to learn from Ms. Stout that Bill Clinton's presidency is evidence of a similar trend in the United States. According to Ms. Stout, Clinton (now read carefully here) has "steered" his "left-leaning" party "away from entrenched interests" toward the center. This move rightward by the Democrats, under the leadership of Clinton, represents, according to Ms. Stout, a leftward movement by the country, since, she says, the Democrats under Clinton's leadership are still left of where the Republicans were when George Bush was in the White House.

In the past four years, Democrats have lost control of both the Senate and the House, and watched as the president they so happily elected in 1992 abandoned most of the liberal agenda upon which he ran in favor of such things as welfare reform, a balanced budget, and lower taxes. This is not a move leftward, whether the *Wall Street Journal's* Hilary Stout knows it or not.

My theory on the recent elections in Europe is that, with the possible exception of England, socialism has progressed so far, and done so much lasting damage to the competitiveness and to the work ethic of most European nations, that any serious talk of government spending cutbacks, or of reduced wages and benefits in the private sector, is not even considered an option by a majority of voters.

Government subsidies and transfer payments (30% in France, 23% in Germany, 29% in Italy, 38% in the Netherlands; compared with 13% in the United States), coupled with extensive government-mandated private sector labor benefit guarantees (weeks and weeks of paid vacation and sick leave), and huge public payrolls (up to one-fourth of all employees work for the government) have created a solid majority of people across the continent who believe that, as recent strike literature in France maintained, "A job is a right, an income is owed us."

A political victory by the right under these circumstances is out of the question. Indeed, in France many, many people take seriously the idea that the solution for the nation's high unemployment and lagging productivity is for everyone to work fewer hours for the same pay and for the government to hire more workers. I'm not making this up.

In short, I think socialism has so permeated the societies of most European countries, that there is virtually no possibility that sound economic policies can be implemented via normal democratic processes. My guess is that some sort of social and economic train wreck, as for example happened in the Soviet Union, will be required. I further believe that such a train wreck is inevitable.

In the United States, by contrast, socialism has not progressed to the point of becoming an economic garrote. Attempts by the left to fan the flames of class envy have been largely unsuccessful. American labor is more and more in partnership with American capital, via extensive bonus plans tied to profits. And while the federal debt and unfunded liabilities for such programs as Social Security and Medicare are staggering, there is a reasonable chance that sensible economic policies can substantially mitigate the problems this debt has created without placing undue stress on any major social or economic group.

A move to the right under these circumstances is not out of the question, as it is in most European nations. Indeed, it is so natural a choice that even Bill can't resist toying with the idea, even though it is unlikely that he fully understands it.

Before closing, I would like to make what I consider to be a very important point about the constantly on-going political fights in Washington. To do this, I will lean heavily on the views of my oft-quoted good friend Claes Ryn, who teaches politics at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Claes believes, and I heartily agree, that it is important to always keep in mind that the principal battlefield in the war over what kind of nation America will be in the 21st century is not Washington. Washington is one of the spoils of this war. It is the place where the results of the various skirmishes and engagements are written into the law books. It is one of the places where a scorecard is kept.

When the nation moves to the right, conservatives win more political fights in Washington. When the nation moves leftward, conservatives lose more. The movement itself is undoubtedly influenced by politicians. But politicians are not the primary movers. The real movers are those individuals in society who fashion and influence the way the public thinks about things, or as Claes puts it, the way people "process information." The real movers, he says, are the people who "draw us into their way of experiencing the world." These people, Claes says, are the nation's artists, authors, entertainers and advertisers.

Claes explains that an individual's view of the world is shaped to an enormous degree by the artistic symbols to which he or she is exposed. Some such symbols strengthen character and imagination, and in doing so promote a keener sense of reality. Others, by contrast, destroy character and weaken an individual's ability to reason.

This, Claes says, explains why some people seem to cling so tenaciously to economic and social doctrines that have been discredited time and time again by both experience and theory. There is, of course, no end to examples of this phenomenon. Common cases in point include insistence by many people on higher and higher taxes, despite overwhelming evidence that nations with moderate tax rates are more prosperous than those with very high rates; resistance to real welfare reform, despite overwhelming evidence that the program has become erroneously pernicious for many of the very people it was designed to help; and support for educational policies that overwhelming evidence demonstrates are directly responsible for the decay the system has suffered over the past several decades.

This strange behavior isn't necessarily a function of low intelligence, Claes says. "In this century alone," he adds, "one can point to many individuals of obvious intelligence who have spoken foolishly on some subject. A number of Nobel prize winners come to mind who have combined genius in some field with naiveté in others." And it certainly isn't that the practical arguments in their favor are decisive. The explanation, Claes says, lies in the framework from which people view things. And this framework is dictated 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.

The article in which Claes set forth these thoughts some 10 years ago, entitled "The Humanities and Moral Reality," does not offer specific examples of the enormous social, and ultimately political, power of literature and the arts. But they, of course, abound in world history.

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 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 widest 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 centuries 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."

In the October 1996 issue of *Commentary* Norman Podhoretz writes, in a piece entitled "Liberalism and the Culture: A Turning of the Time?" that the left does not oppose the great

books of Western civilization because they are irrelevant. They do it, he says, because they are all too relevant.

In short, while the battles in Washington are important, they aren't the decisive ones. Just as Wellington noted that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the battle for the soul of America will ultimately be won in the humanities classes of the nation's high schools, colleges and universities. If Milton and Shakespeare die, just as sure as God made little green apples, so eventually will the conservative cause in Washington.

This is the belief, by the way, that underlies the mission statement of the National Humanities Institute, a non-profit, Washington-based organization that "seeks to revitalize the humanities, and with them 'the culture,' as the only way of effecting real and lasting change" in American. In the interests of full disclosure, I should mention that Claes is Chairman of this organization and I serve on the board. For more information visit us on the Web @ <http://nhumanities.org/>.

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