

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

January 06, 2006

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## The Bulldozer and the Blowhard

The people of Israel are in an uncharacteristically somber mood today. Prime Minister Ariel [Arik] Sharon lies in a medically-induced coma at the Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, the victim of a massive stroke. And despite the heartfelt prayers and wishes of kings and commoners, of Jews, Christians and Muslims, the sad fact is that Mr. Sharon's chances for recovery -- let alone survival -- are at best, terribly bleak. But despite the most tenebrous of prognoses, prayers will continue being offered. That is the way we humans are; so long as there is breath, there is hope.

To much of the world, Ariel Sharon is the archetypical Israeli leader: a general who became a politician. To much of the Arab world, Sharon is remembered as the architect of the massacre at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in 1982 -- an act for which the investigative Kahane Commission found him "unfit to hold public office" and "personally responsible" for the carnage. To Israelis and millions of Jews around the world, Sharon is one of the last of a dying breed: a Founder whose life both spans and mirrors the history of the Jewish State.

Ariel Sharon was born 20 years before Israel became a state, fought in its War of Independence as a young man, became a revered General, and eventually its Prime Minister. In terms of American history, that would be as if he were born in 1756, fought in the Revolutionary War, and became president in the late 1820s to early 1830s. To compare Sharon's timeline [though

definitely not his personality] to an early American, think James Monroe. From the distance of nearly 175 years [he died on the 4th of July in 1831], Monroe is more iconic than real. But as real as Ariel Sharon is in the year 2006, he nonetheless has more than a touch of iconicity about him. He is, as stated above, one of the last of a dying breed. To the Israelis -- whether they love or hate him, swear by him or swear at him -- Ariel Sharon is one of the last of the "giants."

Most Israeli politicians have nicknames. Sharon is no exception. While many know him by the diminutive, affectionate *Arik*, much of the Israeli press calls him *ha-dachpor* -- "The Bulldozer." While one might imagine that this pet name stems from Sharon's earlier penchant for leveling the homes of suspected Palestinian terrorists, it actually refers to his temperament and style: a man who brooks no challenge and who ignores all obstacles. Of late, Sharon has been mellowing; so much so that his former allies in the conservative Likud bloc had been questioning his powers of reason. In recent months, Sharon had actually done the unthinkable: created a new political party -- indeed a brand new, sweeping coalition -- that stood an excellent chance of shifting the tectonic plates beneath the surface of Israeli politics. With Sharon out of the picture it is anyone's guess just how successful his *Kadima* ["Forward!"] Party will do in the upcoming March 28 elections.

While "The Bulldozer" lays in his induced coma in Jerusalem, "The Blowhard" - the Reverend Pat Robertson" has been doing what he does best: simultaneously sticking both feet in his mouth. Unbelievably -- not to mention incredibly, confoundedly, amazingly, staggeringly and stupefyingly -- Robertson had the unconscionable temerity to state that Prime Minister Sharon's stroke was an act of Divine retribution! In a rambling, disjointed statement to his far-flung viewing audience the obnoxious televangelist stated that God was punishing Sharon [just as he had the assassinated Yitzchak Rabin] for "giving away God's land. " As "proof," Robertson cited part of a verse from the Biblical Book of Joel [4:2]: ". . . *I will enter into judgment with them there . . . whom*

*they have scattered among the nations and divided my land.*" Mixing Biblical "prophecy" with lordly condescension ["Sharon was personally a very likable person. I'm sorry to see him in this condition . . ."] Robertson concluded that God punished the Israeli P.M. because "He was dividing God's land, and I would say woe unto any Prime Minister of Israel who takes a similar course . . ."  
[Click this link: [Robertson on Ariel Sharon's stroke](#) Scroll down this linked page for the Robertson telecast]

I watch, I listen, I disbelieve. I ask myself "how in the world can God permit a blasphemous gasbag like Robertson to speak in Co's [his/her] name? How is it that God hasn't sent a bolt of lightening up Robertson's rectum? Two possible answers come to mind, the first of which is an absolute non-starter: there is no God. OK, we've dispensed with that, which leaves, as far as I can fathom, just one additional explanation: God's ways are both mysterious and inscrutable. Wonderful! That certainly helps a lot!

But wait: I remember a lesson from years and years ago -- a lesson I actually learned but a stone's throw from the very hospital in which Ariel Sharon now clings to life. It was our first official day of rabbinic school at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College on King David Street. There were about 65 of us, all gathered in the school's sanctuary, anxiously awaiting an address by the dean, a revered rabbi/scholar named Ezra Spicehandler. Dr. Spicehandler welcomed us, told us that by the time we were ordained in another 5 or 6 years our class would be considerably smaller [indeed, my class had less than 20], and that each of us had been chosen for a specific reason.

"Not only are you going to be learning from the faculty in the next 5 or 6 years," he said, "you are also going to be learning from one another." We all looked around at one another, imagining who was going to be a "star," and who would drop by the wayside.

"Everyone in this program," Dr. Spicehandler continued, "indeed, everyone in this world, has something to teach." Here he took a pregnant pause and looked

across the room from one end to the other. Eyes flashing, a tiny smile on his face, he said " . . . some people are placed here on this earth in order to teach you what not to be, how not to act, or what never to say." Predictably, there followed a round of chuckles, nervous coughing and furtive glances. "Don't ever forget," he concluded "that even these miscreants can play an important role in your development. Without them, we couldn't become as good, as noble or as honorable as God wants us to be." And with that he left the pulpit.

Perhaps God, in Co's [his/her] infinite wisdom, has permitted the Reverend Pat Robertson to continue making such outrageous, shocking [but no long surprising] statements so that we will learn what not to be and definitely what not to say. I guess we should all muster up a "thank you" to good old Pat.

Nah. It would be a colossal waste of time. Actually, I think I'd rather use my time praying for a Bulldozer than thanking a Blowhard. . .

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# Beating the Bushes

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January 13, 2006

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## The Rupture . . . I Mean The Rapture

From the *You've Gotta Be Kidding* Department:

Which of the following five is, by far, the most successful novelist in American publishing history?

- A. Mark Twain    B. Edna Ferber    C. Tim LaHaye  
D. Ernest Hemingway    E. John Steinbeck

If, to your credit, you selected either Twain, Ferber, Hemingway or Steinbeck, you are likely more literate than most, a person of good taste and refinement, an individual who probably spends more time listening to National Public Radio than to Rush Limbaugh. Unfortunately, if you selected Twain, Ferber, Hemingway or Steinbeck, you are also wrong -- by millions and millions of editions sold. Although I don't have the precise statistics at hand -- if, indeed, anyone does -- the dozen novels in Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* series have, to date sold in excess of **65 million** copies -- easily outdistancing the combined total of his four more venerated literary colleagues.

Tim LaHaye?

The *Left Behind* series?

Who gives a hoot and a holler?

We all should. ignorance of LaHaye, his *Left Behind* juggernaut, and the series's immense, fanatic readership is something we do at our own peril. In 2001, the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals named LaHaye "the

most influential American evangelical leader of the past twenty-five years." I repeat, *the most* influential American evangelical leader of the past quarter-century. More influential than Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, or any of the other leading lights of the religious right. Considering that there are upwards of 70 million evangelicals in the United States -- about a quarter of the population -- attending more than 200,000 churches on a weekly basis, ignorance of their existence, of who's leading them, indeed, ignorance of their millenialist *weltanschauung* is a serious, serious misstep.

LaHaye, the *Left Behind* series and its vast readership are soldiers in a millenialist army that is waiting, praying and anticipating the fulfillment of God's promise -- as found in the Biblical book of *Revelation* -- that Endtimes are indeed, just around the corner. It is the unshakable belief of LaHaye and his millions upon millions of reader/acolytes that all signs and portents lead to one unmistakable conclusion: that the final titanic struggle between God and the anti-Christ is about to take place. The location? Why Israel, of course. Part of *Revelations'* prophecy holds that in order for the final battle between good and evil to take place, the Jewish people must once again be in control of "Biblical Israel." Couple that with natural disasters -- floods and fires, hurricanes and monsoons -- and the increasing moral debasement of society, and you have, in the Evangelicals playbook, all the requisite ingredients for the final battle royal -- the Apocalypse. LaHaye's *Left Behind* novels [co-authored with Jerry Jenkins] all deal with "the conspiracy" wrought by godless secular humanists to banish morality, decency and -- dare we say? -- Christianity itself from America. In each novel, of course, the forces of righteousness, embodied in some incredibly handsome, blond, blue-eyed hunk, discovers, roots out, and destroys the nefarious forces of evil. LaHaye/Jenkins' novels carry such titles as *Apolyon*, *Apocalypse*, *Assassins*, *Babylon Rising*, *Soul Harvest*, and *The Secret of Ararat*.

LaHaye's minions are, if nothing else, among the most fervently pro-Israel people on the face of the earth. As a result, many Jews have found in LaHaye,

a marvelous ally. But know this of a certainty: there is a due bill for the overwhelming support that evangelicals show for Israel. Those Jews who refuse to convert, will certainly die a miserable death. It turns out that LaHaye's support for Israel is far more for the sake of his immortal soul, than for the sake of the Jewish State.

Those who subscribe to this worldview fervently believe themselves to be among the fortunate few who will emerge from the battle . . . caught up in the "rapture." In Christian eschatology, the "rapture" will see all true Christians -- those who are "saved" -- transported from Earth to Heaven by God. All the rest, the billions of "unsaved" Moslems, Hindus, Shintoists, Buddhists, Jews, secular humanists, etc., will die a bloody agonizing death. According to LaHaye and his true believers, the blood of the unsaved will create a river 200 miles long and at least four-and-a-half feet deep. I don't know about you, but the God I pray to is the soul of love, justice and compassion. He/She is definitely not at all interested in extirpating the vast majority of humanity. Indeed, who in their right mind would give such a vengeful deity a second thought, let alone a moment's prayer?

It seems that ever since the *beginning* of time, there have been those out there predicting the *end* of time. As Koheleth, the eponymous author of *Ecclesiastes* would have it, "there is nothing new under the sun." Mass "Armageddon Mania" infected Europe at the end of the first millennium when, in the late fall of the year 999, tens of thousands of Knights, citizens, serfs and children flocked to Jerusalem to await the end of the world. Again in the early 16th century, London swarmed with fortune-tellers and astrologers, who convinced more than 20,000 people to move to the high ground of Kent and Essex. Such was the fear of the time that the prior of St. Bartholomew built -- at enormous expense -- a fortress at Harrow on the Hill stocked with a better than two-month supply of food. In the early 1840s, hundreds of people believed that the famous Elizabethan astrologer Dr. John Dee's prediction

[made in 1598] that the world would end on St. Patrick's Day 1842, would mark the end of Europe. Their belief was based on Dee's verse:

*In eighteen hundred and forty-two, four things the sun shall view.  
London's rich and famous town, hungry earth shall swallow down. Storm and  
rain in France shall be, till every river runs a sea. Spain shall be rent in twain,  
and famine waste the land again . . .*

In 1954, an Italian adage that "Rome and the world are safe so long as the Colosseum stands" brought mass hysteria to Italy and most of Europe. On May 18 of that year, engineers were alarmed by huge cracks appearing in the 1,800-year old amphitheater. Sure enough, someone suggested the sign had come, and set the day of destruction at May 24. Thousands appeared in St. Peter's Square, awaiting the end of the world. And on and on and on . . .

There are at least two things which make LaHaye's apocalyptic vision far more frightening than all the others combined:

- First, none of the others had the "advantage" of mass media dissemination. No one else's tracts, prognostications or millennialist rantings were like La Haye's, published by the tens of millions, or broadcast over the airwaves twenty-four hours a day. Even more haunting, there are now children's versions of the *Left Behind* books and a new *Left Behind* PC game! Yes indeed, the Rapture is now up there with such mega-selling PC games as *World of Warcraft*, *Half-Life 2*, *Star Wars: Republic Commando*, and *Halo: Combat Evolved*.
- Second, and this is even more critical, rarely -- if indeed ever -- has any vision of the Rapture, Endtimes and Armageddon been shared by so many people in seats of power. It is frightening beyond words to realise that LaHaye's roster of Rapturists includes such people as the late President Reagan, Senators Jesse Helms and Trent Lott, former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, and even President George W. Bush.



LaHaye's vision -- shared by so many -- has it that they, the forces of good, are at war with a society that is suffused with gays, liberals, Muslims, Arabs, the United Nations, and "militant secularists" of all stripes. Further, they accuse these disparate groups of destroying Christian America [anyone forgotten the flap over "Merry Christmas" versus "Happy Holidays?"], murdering millions of unborn children, assaulting the Christian family by promoting promiscuity and homosexuality, and driving Christ out of the public square. This is precisely the dialectic at play in the Left Behind series; this is the haunting vision which leads to the Rapture.

I say that to be ignorant of what this enormous sub-culture professes and believes is extraordinarily perilous. For while LaHaye and his minions are awaiting, praying and trying to bring about a Rapture that may never occur, they are definitely creating a Rupture in the fabric that has held democratic, civil society together for more than 225 years.

LaHaye would do well to read Mark Twain, for it was that "other" best-selling author who wrote: "It is better to keep your mouth shut and let people think you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt."

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

January 19, 2006

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## This Too Shall Pass . . .

It seems to me that one malady we political junkies suffer from the most is lack of historic perspective. What do I mean? What is the nature of this "illness?" To my way of thinking, it is the tendency, found in so many of us who feel passionate about politics, political action, and political issues, that we've sunk down about as far as we can go, and that the blue sky we so desperately crave, is far beyond our reach. George W. Bush and the current crop of Republican lawmakers infesting Capitol Hill will do that to you! Its a feeling given currency in the writings of John Milton: "We know of no time when we were not as we are now . . ."

This lack of historic perspective can lead to weak wills, flaccid spines and fatigued souls. So what is Doctor Stone's prescription for what ails us? Why a fable, that what. The following is an age-old Jewish tale from the remarkable collection of stories dealing with King Solomon, the wisest of them all . . .

King Solomon, we are told, had more than a thousand wives. Understandably, he also had an incredible number of children. Lamentably, the wise king's favorite son was a very depressed lad. Being both wise and highly intuitive, Solomon understood his son's problem. The boy, who idolized his father, felt that no matter what he did, no matter how much he learned, he could never be the kind of son who could measure up to the wise king who bore him. Solomon also understood that merely saying to the lad "you don't have to out-perform me; you don't have to out-think me; I love you for who you are" would not be enough. He had to come up with something far more drastic;

something that could truly convince his son that he was indeed, very, very special. After a great deal of prayer and contemplation, Solomon hit upon a plan . . .

One day, Solomon called for his depressive son. As the lad entered the throne room, Solomon made a great gesture of dismissing all of his servants, attendants and advisors. When they were alone, Solomon said to the boy: "I have a very special gift for you; a gift which no one else on the face of the earth possesses."

"What is it?" the boy asked, a dubious look on his face.

"It is an object that will place within your hand and your life the most profound bit of wisdom there is. And no one but you will possess it." The boy stared in amazement, not able to believe what he was hearing.

"Hold out your hand," King Solomon commanded his son. The boy did so. The king reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a most unique coin -- a coin that was made of ruby on one side, and sapphire on the other. He placed the coin in his son's hand.

"Now, close your hand," he commanded. The boy closed his hand.

"This coin contains the most profound wisdom in the universe," the king began. The boy started at his father, admiration and awe in his eyes. "You know the feeling you get that everything is wrong, everyone is against you and that there is no hope for the future?" the king asked.

"You, I certainly do," the boy responded in a monotone. "With me, it's a way of life, I'm afraid to say." Solomon smiled.

"Well, my son, when you feel that way, I want you to look at the ruby face of the coin. Engraved on it is a lesson that will carry you through. Please, open your hand and read what is there."

The boy opened his hand, stared at the coin's red face and read the Hebrew words *gam ze ya-ah-vor*, "this too shall pass."

"But father, could this be true?" the boy asked in amazement.

"Oh yes, without question it is true. And what's more, things will begin to get better and better and better, until the time will come that all this pain, misery and depression you feel is even less than a distant memory. You will feel so strong, your life will be so wonderful, that you will feel invincible."

"I cannot wait for that day father," the boy said, a smile beginning to work its way into his eyes.

"And when you reach that blessed plateau, I want you to take out the coin and read what is on the sapphire face. Now, open your hand, turn the coin over, and read what is on the other side." The young prince did as he was told. He opened his hand, studied the words on the sapphire side of the coin, and blinked once, twice, thrice in utter amazement.

"Well, what does it say?" King Solomon asked, in a gentle, soothing voice.

*Gam ze ya-ah-vor* "this too shall pass!" The boy closed his hand and looked up at his father. "But it says precisely the same thing!

"Yes, my son," Solomon answered. "This is the most profound lesson I can teach you -- a lesson I promise never to teach anyone else. That in life, you must have both balance and perspective. Nothing -- neither the pain of loss and oppression or the joy of victory and success last forever. Rather, they are a mere part of life's natural cycle. The object is to keep that in perspective."

From that day on, so we are told, King Solomon's favorite son was a changed person.

And may that lesson not be lost upon us. The dark days which currently surround and surmount us will one day pass; the baton will once again be passed into the hands of those who truly care about more than assisting the haves of society. We will once again be restored to the offices we so dearly seek. Things will get better and better and better. And then, as it inevitably must, the baton will be passed back . . .

It's all a matter of historic perspective.

And, if King Solomon is right, the baton should be coming our way soon -- perhaps in 2006, definitely in 2008 . . .

Amen!

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# Beating the Bushes

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January 26, 2006

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## Sam Alito [You Must Beware His Allies If You Dare]

What with the upcoming debate and vote on the nomination of Samuel ["He's really a decent guy"] Alito, Jr., to the Supreme Court, we present the following parody, meant specifically for those with enough courage to go against the tide -- to be sung to the tune of Scott McKenzie/Papa John Phillips' *San Francisco (Be Sure To Wear Some Flowers In Your Hair)*:

*If you're voting, 'gainst Sam Alito,*

*You must beware his allies if you dare;*

*If you're voting 'gainst Sam Alito,*



*You're gonna need some courage this I swear.*

*For those who vote 'gainst Sam Alito*

*Bummer slime will be devoid of care,*

*Midst the feats of Sam Alito,  
Mental people with powers in their lair.  
All who cross creation, will not earn salvation;  
Such a commotion.  
They're a bold aberration, with a brain dessication  
Such a commotion, such a commotion.  
For those who vote 'gainst Sam Alito,  
You must beware his allies if you dare,  
If you vote 'gainst Sam Alito,  
Bummer slime will be devoid of care . . .*

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# Beating the Bushes

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February 02, 2006

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## You Were Right? I Was Wrong?

The following story is told of Joseph Stalin and his arch-rival, the then-exiled Leon Trotsky:

One day in the early 1930s, a beaming, jubilant Stalin marched into the ornate chamber of the Comintern Executive Committee waving a telegram. "Comrades!" the Soviet dictator proudly proclaimed, "I have been vindicated!! I have here in my hand a cable from Trotsky, that running dog revisionist lackey, apologizing for his political indiscretions!" The assembled Comintern members sat in stunned silence, for they, better than anyone else in the Soviet Union, were intimately aware of the historic political enmity [not to mention personal animus] that existed between the two men.

"What does his telegram say?" asked a disbelieving Comintern member named Lev Kamenev.

"Just this," responded Stalin, adjusting his glasses: "**You** were right. **I** was wrong. **I** should apologize." With that, Stalin took off his glasses and looked around the room at his assembled colleagues, proud as the proverbial peacock. Then, Grigory Zinoviev, another Comintern member [whom Stalin would execute in August 1936], rose and to speak:

"With all due respect, Comrade Stalin, while these are undoubtedly the words Leon Trotsky wrote, you have failed to grasp their meaning. Permit me to read the cable as he meant it to be understood."



"You doubt my ability to read and understand?" Stalin thundered.

"No, of course not, Comrade," Zinoviev answered, refusing to back down. "Its just that I have known this man Trotsky for a lifetime, ever since he was Lev Davidovich Bronstein. Please permit one Jew to read the words of another." Stalin angrily handed the cable to Zinoviev. Putting on *his* glasses, Zinoviev cleared his voice and read:

"***You*** were right? ***I*** was wrong? ***I*** should apologize . . .?"

The moral is patently obvious: oftentimes the meaning of a message depends on the ear and the soul of the listener.

I was reminded of this tale while listening to the various politicians and talking heads recapping President Bush's State of the Union address. As in the case of Trotsky's telegram, everyone heard the same words. But, depending on whether one was filtering those words through the ears of Stalin or the soul of Zinoviev [so to speak], one could easily distinguish two distinctly different speeches.

"Powerful!" "Forceful!" "A speech for the ages!" proclaimed the Republican leadership, exhausted from nearly an hour of jumping up and down, offering thunderous applause every time the president finished a sentence. "Really showed who's the boss!" "That will have the Democrats on the defensive!" agreed the ditto-headed, the "Fair and Balanced" mouthpieces of the Fourth Estate.

"Shameful!" "Shallow!" "Nothing but hollow bromides," responded Democratic lawmakers, looking both relaxed and stupefied after an hour largely spent sitting on their hands and hoping that the cameras wouldn't catch them groaning, grimacing or shaking their heads in disbelief. "The opposite of compassion, definitely not conservative, grumbled the "left-liberals" of Air America Radio and NPR.

Yes indeed. Depending on whether the ears and soul belonged to a Democrat or a Republican, the speech's import and message were as distinct and divergent as night is from day.

Those sitting on the Republican side of the aisle saw President Bush paint a picture of a nation poised on the precipice of victory over terrorism; an administration ready to take whatever steps it deems necessary to promote, protect and defend American liberty; a kindly, compassionate leadership standing ready to create democracy where heretofore there was tyranny -- indeed, men and women prepared to lend a helping hand to all those in need. According to what the Republicans heard, job creation is at an all time high. Dependence on foreign [read: Arab] oil is going to be decreasing. And, if the Congress will only give the president line-item veto authority, the fight against special interests will be won. We will, the president said, steadfastly support the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our students, our sick and our elderly.

Yes, there was certainly something for everyone in the president's State of the Union -- presuming that by "everyone" we limit our definition to that cadre of well-fed, well-housed, high-income acolytes of the Republican right -- those who stand poised to make tangible gains.

Those are the words Stalin read. But what did Zinoviev hear? What message did Democrats, progressives and thinking members of the middle class discern between the lines?

First and foremost, we are *not* winning our war against terror -- in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Palestinian State, or even at home. There is a huge, huge difference between holding an election and building a free, democratic state. Just ask the voters of Baghdad.

Many of us heard a president who obdurately maintained that he can and will, at his sole discretion, mandate warrantless wiretaps of conversations and emails regardless of what the F.I.S.A. law mandates. Essentially, while standing before Congress and the American people, President Bush was telling

us that he is above the law -- the Constitution be damned. In making his "make my day" declaration on wiretapping-in-the-name-of-preserving-American-liberty, the president was hurling down a gauntlet that has "high crimes and misdemeanors" written all over it.

"America," the president informed us with a straight face, "is addicted to oil." What an insightful revelation! And here I thought we all addicted to hummus. Now that Exxon-Mobil has made the single-largest annual profit in all American history, it is time, according to what W. said, to begin weaning ourselves from the grip of Arab oil -- he who comes from an oil family in an oil state and whose administration looks like a rogue's gallery of oil lobbyists. The fact of the matter is that we import far more oil from Canada and Mexico than we do from the Arab States. To proclaim that his administration now stands poised to grant funding for research into alternate fuel sources is beyond cynical.

W. declared that he wants to help all those in need -- the undereducated, the elderly, and those in poverty. How? By cutting the student loan program? By slashing funds that assist seniors purchase prescription drugs or single mothers to hunt down the deadbeat fathers of their impoverished children? By making his tax cuts to the wealthiest 1% permanent? Just 24 hours after his State of the Union address, Bush's Congress passed [by a largely party-line vote of 216-214] \$40 billion worth of cuts in social services. As a result, students will see interests rates on their loans rise. Medicare and Medicaid recipients will find it far more difficult to qualify for coverage. Single working moms will have to work longer hours for less pay.

How about the fiasco that is American health care? Bush proudly placed himself on the side of the angels by proposing "health savings accounts." What a marvelous idea; suggest that people who, despite working two jobs are barely making ends meet, save money for future health care needs. And this at a time when the rate of personal savings is at an all time low!

The president issued a call for increased civility and decreased partisanship in political discourse. That is rich. This is the same man who steadfastly keeps Democrat leadership out of the policy loop and refuses to speak to any but the already convinced. This is the man who directed his Congressional lieutenants to snooker Democrats into supporting his "No Child Left Behind" initiative, without ever telling them that all costs would be assumed by the various states. This is the administration that has seen fit to tar any and all who disagree with the brush of "ultra-left-liberalism."

For a man who until recently blared the trumpet of "compassionate conservatism," he was all but mute when it came to addressing the hundreds of thousands of victims of Hurricane Katrina who are still languishing without hope in the Gulf. Then again, what might we expect? After all, the voters of New Orleans are largely poor, African American and overwhelmingly Democrat.

Bush choked back a tear as he introduced the wife and parents of a young soldier killed in Iraq, and then spoke not one word about the plight of returning veterans. When, we might well inquire, was the last time he personally visited a grieving parent or an orphaned child? Never, that's the answer.

The gap between what conservatives heard and progressives understood is, I fear, even more pronounced than that caused by Trotsky's cable long ago. I firmly believe that when we historians have our say, this president, this administration and this Congress will go down in the books as being the most greedy, rapacious and arrogant in all American history.

It doesn't require a Zinoviev to understand this.

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February 09, 2006

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## The Legion of the Perpetually Offended

Years ago, I was asked to do the funeral of a first-class scamp -- a man who had been a much beloved racetrack tout. Having spent decades in and around the horsey set, the deceased had come to know -- and be befriended by -- a wide array of gamblers, jockeys and breeders. One such friend was Yankee owner George Steinbrenner, a living legend among lovers of horseflesh. It seems that somewhere along the line, Mr. Steinbrenner had engifted the beloved tout with a minority stake in the Bronx Bombers. As a result, not only did "The Boss" give one of the eulogies at the aforementioned funeral; the chapel was packed with such living legends as Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Whitey Ford and Phil Rizutto. Needless to say, for a lifelong, world-class baseball aficionado, this was beyond Nirvana.

So, wearing my Boston Red Sox yarmulke [Sorry, I'm decidedly not a Yankee fan], I led a truly unique and memorable funeral service. Not surprisingly, virtually all of the eulogies dealt with either horse racing or baseball. What else should have been mentioned? The stock market? The price of tea in China? The decimation of the ozone layer? I recall that Mr. Steinbrenner drew a lot of laughs and an extended hand of applause when he declared that in memory of the deceased, the Yankees were going to take that season's pennant -- "no matter what the Commissioner thinks of me." Yes, it was a pointedly political statement, but no one took umbrage. After all, this was "The Boss" addressing the Yankee faithful on behalf of a man who was buried wearing a Yankee jersey. It was all so terribly logical. . .

What is not at all logical is the great offense taken by the nation's conservative punditocracy to some of the eulogies given at Coretta Scott King's funeral. "They shamelessly politicized what was supposed to be a religious event," lamented Bill O'Reilly, offended to the quick. "Carter's and Lowery's comments were made for one reason and one reason only -- to embarrass the President of the United States," another moaned, crocodile tears welling up in the corner of his eyes. Again, as in the case of the lamented tout above, what in the world were they supposed to talk about at the funeral of such a celebrated and passionate civil rights activist? Baseball?

Two points:

**First**, I am reasonably certain that Coretta Scott King would have been delighted by the words of her eulogizers. I believe that she would have both wanted and expected her memorial service to provide a platform for political [read: moral] messages. "No, no," decry the talking heads. "They made a mockery out of a sacred event." What, I ask you, could be more moral, sacred or reverent than the words of the Reverend Lowery, a devoted disciple of Dr. Martin Luther King: *"She [Mrs. King] deplored the terror inflicted by our smart bombs on missions way afar. We know now there were no weapons of mass destruction over there. But Coretta knew, and we knew, that there are weapons of misdirection right down here. Millions without health insurance. Poverty abounds. For war, billions more, but no more for the poor."* Within these words -- which drew prolonged and cacophonous applause -- can be found the sum and substance of Mrs. King's legacy: fearless words and tireless activism on behalf of the poor, the underfed and the outcasts of society.

Then there was the fire that former President Jimmy Carter hurled across the stage over the deplorable administration response to Hurricane Katrina: *"This commemorative ceremony this morning and this afternoon is not only to acknowledge the great contributions of Coretta and Martin, but to remind us that the struggle for equal rights is not over. We only have to recall the color of the faces of those in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi, those who were*

*most devastated by Katrina, to know that there are not yet equal opportunities for all Americans."*

The **second** point is that to the best of my knowledge, none of those expressing deep-seated offense at what was said at the King memorial ever supported Civil Rights, Affirmative Action or any other of a host of moral issues that were at the very core of Mrs. King's being. If the frightfully offended are so cocksure that Carter, Clinton, *Lowery et al* [who all knew and worked with Coretta] made a mockery of the funeral for partisan political purposes, why didn't they at least have the courage of their convictions [not to mention the decency] and interview the King children; ask them what *they* thought about the speeches? I'll tell you why: these organs of offense know precisely what the King children would have said: RIGHT ON! Such a response would not only get in the way of *their* political tirades; it would also put a crimp in their studied state of offense.

Am I the only one who sees a none-too-subtle trend at work here? It seems that no matter what America's progressives do, say, promote or even avoid, it raises the hackles of the opposition. Disagreement over positions and issues is all well and good; the back-and-forth of honest political debate is, after all, democracy's lifeblood. But this constant banging on the drum of personal offense is -- well, it's just so terribly transparent and puerile. And the "Legion of the Perpetually Offended" seems to be growing week by week. The litany of what offends them is truly staggering:

- They are offended by those who say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas."
- They are offended by virtually anything that comes out of the mouth of either Clinton.
- They are offended by Hollywood movies, rap music and most of modern culture.

- They are offended by those who dare suggest that President Bush has been less than forthcoming; that he lied his way into Iraq or that tax cuts for the wealthiest 1% make sound economic sense.
- And on and on.

Now mind you, membership in the **Legion of the Perpetually Offended** is not limited merely to those holding American citizenship. All over the globe, we see evidence that the ranks of the Legion are swelling. And no matter whether those taking offense live in Washington, Damascus, Montevideo or Bamako, one suspects that their motives may be less than pure. One suspects that their outrage is as much fodder for sound bites as anything else -- that it is the means by which they stir the cauldron of discontent with an eye toward future political victory . . . or worse, as a way to keep the downtrodden from seeing just how little the ruling elites are doing in their name or on their behalf.

Where will it end? Its almost as if these Legionnaires are sitting up late at night dreaming up new things over which to express outrage; new ways in which to add members to their clique.

As the legendary 19th century French actress Madame Dorthe Delezy once noted: *"We are so desirous of vengeance that people often offend by not giving offense."*

By the way, when I die [hopefully, as we say, in 120 years], I want whoever does my funeral service to know that I want it to be as political as possible; that I want my ideals, hopes and dreams to be on display for all to hear. And if anyone wishes to take offense . . . that's their problem.

I am sure that even Mr. Steinbrenner would agree with me -- even though I *do* root for the Red Sox.

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February 09, 2006 in Current Affairs |



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

February 16, 2006

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## An Immodest Proposal

I rather doubt that there is a single literate person in the English-speaking world who does not know Oscar Wilde's witty definition of a cynic as "a person who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing." Without question, Wilde's *bon mot* is as telling and trenchant today as it was back in the late 19th century. And to my way of thinking, the greatest living exemplar of cynicism in the early 21st century would have to be the modern Republican Party. For year in, year out, and from one election to the next, the GOP proves itself to be the party of "God, guns and gays," and yes -- of gross cynicism. How so?

Well, against everything that passes for logic in the halls of academia, Republicans have changed the underlying reason for our war in Iraq no less than three times. *First*, it was the certainty that Saddam Hussein had enough Weapons of Mass Destruction [and indeed, the intention] to destroy anything and everything from Tel Aviv to Telluride. Then, when the WMD canard was exposed and didn't pan out, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Company went on to reason number *two*: that there was a certifiable link betwixt the Butcher of Baghdad and Osama bin Laden. Oops, another one bit the dust! Then, girding up their cynical loins, they went on to rationale number *three*: by toppling Hussein and bringing democracy to the good folks of Iraq [who, we were told would welcome us with flowers and chocolate], we were somehow protecting America from future terrorist attacks. Cynicism and *chutzpah*, plain and simple.

Healthcare in America is another area where GOP cynicism shines like a beacon on a tempest-tossed night. With the number of uninsured hovering near the 50 million mark and the cost for even basic medical coverage going through the roof, the Bush Administration has proposed that we put our "excess dollars" into something called "health savings accounts." Yes indeed; let all those who can barely make ends meet -- let alone wind up in the same neighborhood -- deposit monies they do not have into accounts that will no doubt be depleted by their first visit to the doctor. Cynicism: knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing.

A final example of Republican cynicism is the replacing of policy and progress with political bromides. Karl Rove, the President's so-called "brain," has let it be known to the party faithful that in order for the GOP to continue its electoral winning streak in 2006 and 2008, all they have to do is continually repeat two refrains:

- That the Republicans are the only party who can truly protect America from future terrorist attacks, and
- That the Democrats -- those squishy left secular humanists -- are a party without a single idea.

Now mind you, such a political strategy is totally devoid of any meat -- even a single salient proposal for repairing -- let alone seriously addressing -- what ails more than half the American public. And the Democrats, to the consternation of many, have fallen into this GOP trap. Listening to Democratic candidates out on the hustings, one is amazed by how wordy and disjointed their message has become. It's almost as if they believe that all one needs to do in order to open the eyes, ears and hearts of the American voting public is a strategy of attack. Well, take it from one who has been involved in Democratic Party politics for a long, long time: while negativity and sound-bites might be entertaining in the short run, they ultimately won't win elections. One cannot requite cynicism with cynicism. What is needed is a well-conceived, well

thought-out message with two or three issues that don't take a political mastermind to grab hold of.

Herewith, permit me to steal a phrase from Jonathan Swift and make "an immodest proposal" for Democratic victory in 2006 and hopefully 2008 as well. I believe there are two issues which, if hammered away at with clarity, sincerity, and intelligent frequency, can both energize and enliven the American electorate.

The first deals with the economy, stupid. I would suggest that every Democrat candidate propose increasing taxes on America's wealthiest 2%. Precisely how much is not terribly important at this point in time; just the will to raise their taxes is enough for now. This might go a long way toward reducing the staggering, immoral deficit run up by the current administration. Further, I doubt there would be many in the "bottom" 98% who would be against the idea. We simply must hammer away at the idea that over the past five-plus years, Washington has become government of the richest, by the richest and for the richest. And what, we should ask, have the rest of us received in return? Higher prices at the gas pump? Staggering energy bills? The aforementioned 13-digit deficits? Corporations recording higher profits than at any time in human history? The elite get their trillions while we, the common clay, are bought off with a handful of vague promises and a few measly dollars.

Without question, the other arrow in our policy quiver must be the obscene and inequitable cost of healthcare in America. The President, his Cabinet, and members of Congress don't have any worries when it comes to adequate health insurance; the government provides them with the best coverage money [our money] can buy. Same goes for anyone elected to a state legislature, county board of commissioners or a city council. Heck the federal government even provides better health coverage for the people of Iraq than for members of the American military!

Most of us have horror stories to tell. I know that over the past two years, my healthcare provider raised rates to the point where I was faced with spending more per month for insuring myself, my wife and one child, than the monthly mortgage payment on a nearly 4,000 square foot home on the water! Taking matters into her own hands, my wife landed a teaching position which provides basic healthcare coverage. But now, we find that several of our long-term medications are not on our plan's "preferred" list. We are thereby faced with one of two noxious alternatives: start taking medications that aren't precisely what we require, or pay outrageous prices for the drugs we need. If we were Iraqis [or members of Congress] we wouldn't be in this thorny predicament.

Taxing the wealthiest 2% and universal healthcare are two issues that can, in my humble estimation, carry the vote in 2006. And, if all else fails, we can all simply declare for Congress, the state legislature or our local city councils. Our slogan? How about "THE JOB NEEDS [fill in your name] AND [fill in your name] NEEDS THE JOB!"

How's that for cynicism?

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

February 23, 2006

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## IMPEACH GEORGE BUSH!

The time has come, I fear, when we, the people of the United States of America, must begin giving serious consideration to impeaching President George W. Bush. Yes, I know that impeachment is a terribly drastic step -- one definitely not to be taken lightly. But, as the old saw proclaims, "drastic times call for drastic measures." Believe me, I have given this drastic measure a lot of anguished thought. Do not for a single moment assume that I reached this conclusion as a highly partisan Democrat -- which of course I am. I am perfectly cognizant of the fact that were President Bush to be impeached and then convicted, leadership would then devolve to Vice President Dick "Deadeye" Cheney -- not exactly the kind of thought a good Democrat wants to go to bed with at night.

I am certainly not alone in concluding that the president should be impeached; increasingly you can hear the same drum being thumped in newspapers, on the Internet and even in the halls of Congress. And, mind you, this is definitely not some partisan "payback" for the Republicans' light-than-air charges that eventuated in the disgraceful impeachment of President Bill Clinton.

The Framers of the Constitution were both prescient and correct in fearing that the day might come when executive power might run amok; impeachment was the remedy of last resort they provided to protect us against such a situation. The United States Constitution empowers Congress to vote on Articles of Impeachment when, in their estimation, the President is guilty of

"high crimes and misdemeanors" -- an archaic term for a serious abuse of power. A President may not be [or at least should not be] impeached for mere incompetence, personal arrogance or the butchering of the English language. Were such the case, George W. Bush would have been hauled before Congress a long time ago. No, in my mind, and indeed, in the mind of a growing number of other patriotic Americans, President George W. Bush stands accused of high crimes and misdemeanors.

What are they?

- **The War in Iraq:** We now possess a welter of data offering conclusive proof that the President and his administration knowingly and deliberately misled the country into war. First came the claim [backed up by "intelligence"] that Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda terrorists. When that balloon was shot full of holes, a new justification arose: that the Iraqi strongman had "weapons of mass destruction," and was poised to launch both chemical and biological weapons against the West. Another balloon sent up, another balloon fallen to earth. Lastly came the generic claim that by fighting for the liberation of Iraq, we were somehow destroying the perpetrators of 9/11.
- **Engaging in Warrantless Wiretaps:** In 1978, Congress passed the *Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act* [FISA]. This sweeping measure -- an attempt to remedy the more egregious illegal acts of monitoring carried out by the Watergate-era Richard Nixon -- granted the Executive Branch the right to engage in a whole host of surveillance techniques on suspected enemies of America -- provided that the President obtain a warrant from a secret FISA court. Moreover, the law permitted said surveillance to begin even prior to the issuance of a warrant. So long as said warrant was obtained within three days after the commencement of snooping, everything would be considered kosher. And, as we all know by now, getting a warrant wasn't terribly difficult: since 1978, the secret

court has approved more than 10,000 surveillance applications; only four have ever been turned down. Nonetheless, when confronted with this issue and these facts, President Bush claimed that in his capacity as Commander in Chief, he had the legal right to circumvent FISA. His reasoning? He was protecting the people of the United States against further acts of terrorism.

- **Engaging in the Torture of Prisoners:** Despite protestations to the contrary ["We do not torture"], it turns out that the CIA has been running secret jails and engaging in torture -- most notably at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. As former Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman wrote in a recent article for *The Nation*, "it has been well documented that abuse [including torture] of detainees by U.S. personnel in connection with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has been systematic and widespread." We will recall that President Bush opposed the "McCain Amendment" barring torture. Despite his opposition, Congress enacted the law. Then, in his signing statement, the President boldly announced that he has the right, as Commander in Chief, to break laws when it suits him! In essence, he was informing the entire world that he stood poised to violate not only his oath of office [to uphold the laws of the United States], but both the Geneva Conventions and the War Crimes Act.

These are all impeachable offenses. What we are now witnessing on an almost daily basis is that which the late Senator J. William Fullbright called the "arrogance of power." And, while it is abundantly clear that the Constitution makes the President Commander in Chief over our armed forces, it in no way means to grant him [or someday, her], blanket unilateral authority to act as he sees fit in a time of declared [or in this case, undeclared] war.

To throw but one more log onto the bonfire, just this week, we have learned that the Bush Administration intends to cede authority over six major American ports to an international security firm headquartered in Dubai. Putting aside the fact that John Snow, the current Secretary of the Treasury made a \$100

million killing on the sale of his former company -- CSX -- to an English firm which then sold it to the very Dubai firm that the President wants to hire. Never mind that the most recent head of that firm was just named to head up the maritime board that oversees our ports. Put aside the fact that President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Treasury Secretary Snow claim that they weren't even aware of the proposal until they read it in the newspaper. What does all this tell us? That the President and his administration are once again putting cupidity and cronyism ahead of what's in the best interests of the United States of America. President Bush has gone so far as to promise that should Congress vote to deny the deal, he will issue the very first veto of his presidency. Imagine: he really wants us to believe that handing over the security of six major American ports to a company from Dubai -- an emirate that launders terrorist money and denies Israel's right to exist -- that this will somehow advance and improve American homeland security.

This last issue has served to defrost the eyeballs of many Republican leaders in Congress, who are fast approaching a state of high dudgeon over being kept out of the loop. Perhaps they are finally getting a sense of how the Democrats have felt since January of 2001. And yet, despite Republican pique, there are precisely two chances of this Congress handing down Articles of Impeachment against President George W. Bush: absolutely none and even less than that.

So what to do? First and foremost, Congress -- both House and Senate -- must be returned to the Democrats in the upcoming midterm elections. Is this realistic? Yes -- if enough people conclude that America is in danger of being turned into a fiefdom. If enough voters come to realize that "God, guns, and gays" aren't the real issues facing this country; its the single issue of a President grabbing up power and authority like an early-bird shopper at a rummage sale.

For the future of America -- an America that is now financially strapped, morally debased and politically stultified -- George W. Bush must be impeached.



No one is above the law.

Especially not George Walker Bush.

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

March 02, 2006

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## THE MYTH OF THE LIBERAL MEDIA

It goes without saying that the late, unlamented Senator Joseph McCarthy -- the eponymous father of "McCarthyism" -- was no rocket scientist. The careers he ruined, the lives he shattered, no doubt earned him a front row seat in the cauldron of hell. And yet, "Tailgunner Joe" did bequeath one extraordinary political tactic to his conservative progeny: the "big lie." Somehow, in the midst of all his drinking and accusing, he [along with the equally unlamented Roy Cohn] discovered that a patent falsehood, if repeated over and over and over, will eventually be accepted by the unwashed masses as the God's honest truth.

Case in point: the "vast monolithic Communist conspiracy." McCarthy knew in his heart of hearts that he was, as Grandma would have put it, "full of canal water." Nonetheless, he never missed an opportunity to warn, cajole, threaten and destroy -- all in the name of this "big lie."

Sorry to say, but the "big lie" is alive and well in the early 21st century. Case in point: the myth [or fabrication, untruth, invention, or downright cock-and-bull story] that the nation's media has a decidedly, demonstrably liberal bias. This lie has become so prevalent, so accepted and omnipresent, that a generation of schoolchildren have grown up assuming that the words "left-wing" and "media" represent nothing more than an overly repetitive redundancy. Well, I'm here to tell you that it's a lie; a bit, fat, demonstrably bald-faced lie.

A few facts to ponder:

- According to a Pew Center study which examined thousands of news stories coming out of the 2000 presidential election, the media's coverage of Al Gore included one of two themes: either that he lied and exaggerated ["Gore Claims to Have Invented the Internet"], or that he was marred by scandal. The most common theme about George W. Bush, on the other hand, was that he was a "different kind of Republican."
- In the 2004 election, the press missed few opportunities to paint Senator John Kerry as an out-of-touch, latte-sipping, effete elitist, and George W. Bush as a down-home kind of guy with whom everyone would just love to have a beer. Well, truth be told, it was Kerry who grew up in a decidedly middle class family, worked summers and graduated Yale without a dime to his name, and then went off to Viet Nam, and Bush who was a son of privilege, grew up in a family of great wealth, was a legacy admittee to both Yale and Harvard, and then posed as a rancher on land he bought just before running for president. As Carville and Begala wryly note: "We've both spent a fair amount of time in the country, so believe us: If George W. Bush is a rancher, we're a pair of Hassidic diamond merchants."
- A Nexis search undertaken by James Carville and Paul Begala for their dynamite book *Take it Back* [2006, Simon & Schuster] reveals that there were 68,096 stories about Whitewater, Bill Clinton's "penny-ante land deal," as compared to only 110 stories about George W. Bush having committed insider trading [a far more serious offense] as an executive with Harken Energy.
- Neither Clinton nor Bush had a sterling record when it came to military service. And yet, Clinton's dealings with the Selective Service was covered in 13,641 stories, while W's going AWOL from the Air National Guard for a year was mentioned in only 49 stories during the 2000 campaign.

So where oh where is this supposed liberal bias?

Its in the mouths of such conservative crybabies as Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Hannity and Savage [no, that's not a white-shoe law firm] and the minds of much of the American public. The sad fact, I repeat, is that there is no real liberal media bias; it is nothing more than a strategy designed to pressure the media into taking pro-conservative, pro-administration positions. In other words, it is the "big lie" at work, once again. Believe it or not, we progressives aren't the only ones who see the "liberal media" canard for what it is. Even so pedigreed a conservative as former Republican National Committee chair Rich Bond admits that "There is some strategy to it." [i.e., bashing the liberal media]. Reverting to a sports axiom, Bond notes "if you watch any great coach, what they try to do is work the refs. Maybe the ref will cut you a little slack on the next one." How's that for a moment of unguarded truth.

To be fair, its not just the Republicans use of the "big lie" which has made the "liberal media bias" myth a reality in the minds of many, many Americans. Democrats can also be cut in for a share of the blame. As Carville and Begala note: "Whereas too many Democrats simply, passively presume the press will be on their side . . . conservatives push, they criticize, they impugn the motives of journalists . . . they allege bias." The effect of all this, they write, is "often journalists who bend over backwards to prove to conservatives [that] they're not biased."

Democrats have long treated the fourth estate as legitimate players in the political process. Democrats also have a long history of believing that journalists are as smart, as educated and as progressive as they are. They treat the press as intellectual equals, joined in mortal combat against the cretins of ludditic conservatism. Republicans, on the other hand, handle the press through intimidation and confrontation. In other words, they bully the press into proving that they're not liberal by forcing them to provide their conservative *bona fides*. And yet, despite the Republicans' stunning success, they keep up their "big lie." They've maneuvered themselves into the best of all

possible worlds, whereby the whipped cur obeys even while the ogre continues to apply the lash.

How do Democrats break this odious, obnoxious cycle? By merely crying out "*The media isn't liberal! The media is conservative!*"? No way. As distasteful as it may seem, Democrats have to take a page out of the Republican playbook and begin attacking, challenging and exhorting.

We must **attack** a White House that continually lies to both the American public and the press.

We must **challenge** a media that has permitted itself to become nothing more than a flaccid mouthpiece for the administration.

We must **exhort** the American public to take off its blinders and see what has become of this nation since January 20, 2001.

Journalists -- whether they be of the print, visual, audio or cyber variety -- depend upon access. Access is to the media what water is to a mutt; the most basic and essential of ingredients. Deny water to a canine over a long enough period, and it will go mad; deny access to a journalist, and he/she will likely sit up and beg. In other words, if Democrats are ever going to break through the "big lie" of liberal media bias, they will have to learn to be just as tough, just as single-minded and just as aggressive as their vastly more successful Republican counterparts.

Bill Clinton once noted that "Democrats want to fall in love; Republicans want to fall in line." The time is ripe for Democrats to fall in line -- a strong offensive line -- and begin breaking up one of the biggest, most pernicious lies ever perpetrated on the American public.

What do we have to lose? Only the next election . . .

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

March 09, 2006

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## Shver Tzu Zein a Helfand

There's an age-old Yiddish truism that goes *Oy, iz es shver tzu zein a yid*, literally, "It's tough to be a Jew." Like most expressions in the *Yiddishe* lexicon of wit and wisdom, this one speaks volumes about the human condition -- as seen through Jewish eyes. Mind you, it's not really a gripe or a *kvetch*; it's more of a shared "ethnic I.D." -- a maxim that generally requires both a resigned shrug of the shoulders and an impish wind of the eye. To most non-Jews, the emotive meaning of *Oy, iz es shver tzu zein a yid* is about as unfathomable as gangsta' rap to a cloistered Tibetan monk. Its meaning is conveyed not in words, but, rather, in shared experiences; it is understood not in the mind, but rather in the *kishkes* -- the gut.

I would imagine that most ethnic, cultural, or social groups have expressions, axioms and maxims of their own -- phrases whose precise meaning is lost on the great mass of *oislander*. Keeping all the aforementioned verbiage in mind, I humbly wish to offer up a new phrase, the meaning of which should be immediately understandable by [and perhaps limited to] all thinking liberals and progressives: ***Oy, iz es shver tzu zein a helfand***: namely, "It's tough to be an elephant." It goes without saying [though we'll say it anyway] that the elephants to whom we refer are not the kind found in jungles, zoos or circus movies. No, when we say *Oy, iz es shver tzu zein a helfand*, we are referring to the plodding, monocular behemoth which has been the Republican Party's symbol since 1874, when cartoonist Thomas Nast first introduced it in the pages of *Harper's Weekly*. Indeed, it's getting harder and harder to be a Republican. And though it would take tons and tons of magic pixie dust to

make anyone believe that these elephants [the Republicans] are about to become extinct, the reality is there for all to behold: it *is* getting uncomfortably hot and steamy out there in the political jungle.

Finally, finally, members of W's heretofore-compliant Congressional herd are awakening to the realization that the head pachyderm is leading them into lethal political quicksand. The fact is that after more than six years of walking in lockstep with the leader of the pack, Congressional Republicans have finally learned the word "NO." With their all but total rejection of the administration's Dubai Ports World deal, it seems like its beginning to dawn on the pachyderms of Capitol Hill [and by extension, their kinsmen out there in the hinterlands] that if they are to save their own skin, they must flee the herd.

It doesn't take a genius to read a poll. Congressional Republicans are well aware of President Bush's embarrassing 36% approval rating; they know that the American public is beginning to turn against them as well. The American people are becoming increasingly aware of this administration's affinity for avarice; of how Bush and the rest of the herd have devoted themselves heart and soul to the "haves and the have-mores," to use the President's own words. They are beginning to see that blatant incompetence, puerile finger-pointing and hollow rhetoric are the hallmarks of the Bush years. And while they have spent more than six years keeping middle America's focus riveted on such secondary issues as abortion, gay marriage, and the teaching of "Intelligent Design," they have both blithely and blatantly turned this country into history's biggest debtor. They have sold our future to the central bankers of Beijing, permitted their friends to export hundreds of thousands of jobs to India, Malaysia and God knows where else, and given the corporate world tens of billions of dollars in tax forgiveness.

Americans are beginning to ask "how is it possible to cut taxes while waging war? Is it really true that the president didn't know what was going on with Hurricane Katrina? How can he give out multi-billion dollar no-bid contracts to his friends at Halliburton, and then keep going back to Congress for more and

more money?" And on and on. The Elephant just isn't looking so massive anymore. It's tusks are decaying . . .

It should be apparent to anyone paying attention that the National Republican Party is reeling. For in addition to all the above-mentioned shortcomings, there is the corruption; Jack Abramoff is about to become as famous as Paris Hilton. Let's just hope he croons as well as Bing Crosby. If the Democrats are smart, tough and single-minded, they will make sure that Abramoff, Cunningham, Libby, Rove, Ney and DeLay become both household names and symbols -- symbols of a venal herd that tramples the hopes and aspirations of society's neediest, while proclaiming that it is marching in lockstep with God.

So what is the Republican strategy? How are they approaching the upcoming midterm elections you may well ask? Simple. They are going after Senator Hillary Clinton! Wait a second, aren't they vilifying her at least two years too early? After all, this is 2006, not 2008. Perhaps these elephants can't read a calendar. Whatever the case, hardly a days goes by without some right-wing talking head proclaiming that Senator Clinton is "shrill," "angry," or "sounding like a bitter divorcee." This is a political strategy for victory?

What America has been lacking for more years than I care to count is a national challenge; a reason, a purpose for all of us to work together. Abraham Lincoln [the first Republican President] challenged America to be guided by its "higher angels." John F. Kennedy challenged us to "ask not what you're country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Even Lyndon Johnson challenged us to end segregation. What does the current administration ask of Americans? To go shopping? To continue driving SUVs, disbelieve the "myth" of global warming and cheer the further enrichment of the nation's super rich? It boggles the mind. These elephants are stampeding out of control.



If progressives are to take back America, it will require heart, soul, an inexhaustible supply of energy and the willingness to go "big game hunting." The elephants don't have a corner on the market of morality; they just think and say they do. Our issues are the true moral issues: healthcare, education, security for our elders, tax fairness, and the restoration of America's role as a light unto the nations.

***Oy, iz es shver tzu zein a helfand!!***

***Hallelujah!***

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March 09, 2006 in Politics | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

March 16, 2006

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## Shiites and Sunnis: The Schism That Will Not Heal

Seems like no matter where I go these days -- a restaurant, the university, the cinema -- the debate and chatter is over Iraq. The major areas of argumentation are both legion and predictable:

- Should we leave immediately?
- Do we need to send in more troops?
- What was the *real* reason we went in the first place?
- How long are American forces going to have to stay there?
- Will there or won't there be a civil war?

On the last issue, I'm here to tell 'ya, the answer is not only a resounding "YES!" but an emphatic "IT STARTED THE DAY SADDAM WAS DEPOSED!!"

It both amazes and amuses that there is so much debate over whether or not Iraq will break out into a full-fledged civil war. By merely posing the question, it proves -- at least to me -- that those raising the issue are both politically myopic and historically astigmatic.

Those whose knowledge of civil war begins and ends with the American "War Between the States" as it is still referred to in the old South, must acknowledge that there are generally two well-defined sides to a civil conflict, both of which hold fast to a set of political, economic, or even moral beliefs. In America's case, of course, the simple version has it that the Northern states opposed slavery, while the states of the Deep South overwhelmingly favored retaining their "peculiar institution." Never mind that this is a rather simplistic, junior-

high schoolish version of history; never mind that this war had as much to do with Federalism versus States' Rights as it did with slavery. That's a matter for another day and another venue. History does accurately record that the regional antagonism, which eventually led to the firing on Fort Sumter, had been simmering, smoldering and sparking for nearly a hundred years before the first shots were fired.

In the case of Iraq, the sides are just as distinct, though they certainly do not represent such clear-cut geographic regions. Their conflict isn't so much about ideology as it is about theology and religious history. And whereas the American Civil War's gestation was about a century, the civil war currently heating up [and likely to get much, much hotter] in Iraq, has been bubbling and boiling over for nearly 1,400 years.

"How's that?" you say. "1,400 years?" What in the name of God Almighty could keep people at each other's throats for 1,400 years?

Only one thing: religion.

In order to garner some understanding of what in the world's going on in post-Saddam Iraq, one must know something about Islam -- specifically, the schism betwixt *Sunnis* and *Shiites*. One should know at the outset that of the hundreds of millions of Moslems in the world, approximately 85% are Sunni, and 15% Shiite. And despite their relatively low numbers, Shiites form a majority in Iraq, Iran, Bahrain and Azerbaijan. Please do remember that despite comprising somewhere between 60-65% of the population in Iraq [a clear majority] the Shiites were under the thumb of Saddam Hussein, his followers and homicidal henchmen -- all of whom were [and are] Sunnis. Talk about Apartheid!

Shiites and Sunnis. Sunnis and Shiites. Columnists, commentators, pundits and politicians blithely bandy about the terms as if everyone had taken a 101 course in Islamic history. The sad fact is that very few people know the difference between the sects. Heck, most people can't tell you the difference

between Methodism and Presbyterianism! And although I am far, far from being an expert on Islam, the little *chutzpadik* imp that sits astride my left shoulder is urging me to give a brief [and hopefully comprehensible] tour of the terrain.

In order to better understand what in heaven's name is going on in Iraq in 2006 between the Sunnis and the Shiites, one must first go back in time . . . to the year 632 C.E. [that's *A.D.* to non-Jews].

The differences between the Sunni and Shiite sects are rooted in disagreements over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad, who departed this mortal coil in the year 632. The disagreement also extends to the nature of political leadership in the Muslim community. The historic and often lethal debate between Sunnis and Shiites originally centered on whether to award leadership to a qualified and pious individual who would lead by following the customs of the Prophet, or to preserve the leadership exclusively through the Prophet's bloodline. Its sort of like saying "We declare that only the most pious, the most learned, the most charitable can become Chief Rabbi; whereas you declare that the only qualification is being a son of the former Chief Rabbi."

Shortly after Mohammed's death, community leaders elected one **Abu Bakr**, a close companion of the Prophet to become the first *Caliph* [Arabic for "successor"]. Although a clear majority of Moslems accepted this decision, there were those who supported the candidacy of one **Ali ibn Abi Talib**, who was both Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law -- he being married to the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. Although obviously closely allied with Muhammad, there were those who sincerely believed that Ali lacked seniority within the Arabian tribal system and therefore bypassed as the immediate successor.

As one might expect, many of Ali's followers considered Abu Bakr and the two caliphs who succeeded him to be illegitimate interlopers. This faction firmly believed that the Prophet Muhammad himself had named Ali as his successor,

and that the status quo -- i.e. the elevation of Abu Bakr -- was both a corruption and violation of the Divine order.

Those who supported Ali's ascendancy became known as *Shi'a*, a word stemming from the term *shi'at Ali*, namely, "supporters of Ali." There were many others who respected and accepted the legitimacy of his caliphate but opposed political succession based on mere genetics -- being one of the Prophet's blood relatives. This group, which constituted a vast majority of Muslims, came to be known as "Sunni," meaning "followers of [the Prophet's] customs -- *sunna*."

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is where the schism began and, to a great extent, where it has remained ever since. Theologically, there are a few interesting differences between the two factions. Most deal with the nature and interpretation of Islamic law [*shari'a*]. There are no codified laws in either Sunni or Shiite Islam. Rather, there are sources for the interpretation of law, which both groups share. Generally speaking, Shiite legal interpretation, in contrast to that of the Sunnis, allows quite a bit more space for human reasoning.

Shiite religious practice centers around the remembrance of Ali's younger son [the ironically named *Hussein*], who was martyred near the town of Karbala in Iraq by Sunni forces in 680. Each year, his death is commemorated on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram in a somber and sometimes violent ritualistic remembrance known as *Ashura*, which is marked among some Shiites by the ritual of self-flagellation.

Sunnis reject the Shiite belief that the *imams* [religious leaders who are blood relatives of the Prophet Muhammad]] are divinely inspired beings who should be revered. Sunni Muslims do not bestow upon human beings the exalted status given only to prophets in the *Quran*. By contrast, the Shiites' veneration of their *imams* [the most exalted of whom are called *ayatollahs*] approaches a level of infallibility that Sunnis find repugnant.

There are even subdivisions within the sects. Within Shiite Islam one finds:

- **Twelvers:** the most common form of Shiism; "twelvers" accept a line of twelve infallible imams descended from Ali.
- **Ismali** or **Seveners:** the second largest Shiite sect, which recognizes only the first seven imams.
- **Zaydis:** a minority sect that only recognizes the first five imams and,
- **Alawite:** predominantly found in Syria and Lebanon, they interpret the 5 Pillars -- duties -- of Islam as symbolic rather than applied and celebrate an eclectic group of Christian and Islamic holidays].

The Sunnis have one sectarian subdivision, called **Wahhabi**. The Wahhabi are arguably the most pervasive revivalist movement in the Islamic world. Unlike other Islamic sects, they tend to apply the Quran and **Haddith** [sayings of the Prophet and his companions] in a literal way. They occupy a position roughly equivalent to the ultra-*orthodox haridim* in Judaism. It should be noted that there is an extremely close relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the Wahhabi religious establishment. The most conservative interpretations of Wahhabi Islam view Shiites and other non-Wahhabi Muslims as dissident heretics.

So how in the world is it that these two groups [and their various sub groups] could be killing, fighting, and dying over something that happened nearly 1,400 years ago? Ah, there's the great distinction between Western and Eastern history. Some people live and plan for their collective future by giving the past a vote but not a veto; others take marching orders strictly from their collective past. Sunnis and Shiites have been going at it for hundreds and hundreds of years, as if the issues upon which they so violently disagree -- prophetic succession, legal interpretation -- occurred last Thursday. To be sure, the rise of secular ideologies in the first half of the 20th century -- Nationalism, Communism, Saddam's Baathism -- did manage to temporarily mute or deflect

tensions between the sects. But as Bill Cosby once quipped about Novocain, "it doesn't cure pain; it merely postpones it."

Any realistic game plan or strategy for a post-Saddam Iraq -- or indeed for any further relations [or lack thereof] with Iran -- must begin with a solid, thoroughgoing understanding of the historic sectarian tensions that have shaped the Muslim world for more than a thousand years. To merely say "these people are crazy," or "they have no reverence for human life" misses the mark by miles and miles. Anyone who can get the recognized leaders of these two factions to sit down together and talk civilly, will no doubt merit the Nobel Peace Prize -- not to mention the undying gratitude of Allah, Muhammed and the Moslem in the street. But unless and until that happens, please remember: the most uncivil thing in the world is a civil war.

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March 16, 2006 in Politics and Religion | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

March 24, 2006

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## Some Things I Just Don't Get . . .

Truth to tell, I'm a pretty-well educated fellow with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Heck, as a kid, it was a toss-up as to whether I would become a rabbi, a Renaissance Man or starting shortstop for the L.A. Dodgers. Throughout my life I've devoured books and ideas with all the hedonistic abandon of a gourmand with a sweet tooth. The home I grew up in had lots of books -- mostly biographies, novels and a marvelously old one-volume edition of Shakespeare -- and parents who provided me with a first-rate education. To this day, whenever I get stumped for a fact or find my brain in need of a kick-start, I call home, chat with Alice -- otherwise known as Mom -- and generally get pointed in the right direction. She's one smart cookie.

And yet, despite more than 11 years of higher education and a bunch of advanced degrees, there are many things -- pretty basic things -- I just don't understand. I'm reminded of the old Dorothy Parker quote: "No matter how much I know and how much I'll ever learn, there are two things I fear I'll never quite understand . . . how zippers work and the precise function of Bernard Baruch."

So, what are some of these things I just don't understand?

- How is it that so-called "people of faith" -- those who believe every word in the Bible is true -- can be on the wrong side of so many issues? How can they all read the Divine admonitions that we "feed the hungry, clothe the naked and care for the stranger and orphan" and then take a scalpel to precisely those programs that assist those most in need?



- I don't understand the logic of enacting massive, massive tax cuts during a time of war. To me, that makes about as much sense as going out and buying a carton of unfiltered Camels after getting a diagnosis of untreatable lung cancer.
- How can we send our soldiers to fight and die in Afghanistan when that country's religious leaders are screaming for the beheading of a man whose only "crime" is converting from Islam to Christianity?
- How is it possible that so many people can graduate from a four-year college or university without possessing the ability to write a simple declarative sentence, engage in critical thinking or identify the three branches of the American government?
- I simply cannot fathom how it is that despite a welter of objective ecological and climatological facts -- increased drought, snow in San Diego and San Francisco, winter days in which it's colder in South Florida than in New York City -- that people can actually declare that global warming is a myth.
- How in the world can religious leaders like Pat Robertson, James Dobson or Donald Wildmon be so damnably irreligious? Where in the name of all that is holy do they get the unmitigated *chutzpah* to declare that they -- and they alone -- fully understand either the will or the essence of God? How can anyone have the temerity to suggest that former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke was Divine retribution for his having dismantled settlements or ceding land to the Palestinians?
- How can Christians -- who comprise nearly 85% of the population -- spend so much time complaining that their religion is under attack? Do they really believe a butterfly can mortally wound a bear?
- Whatever happened to the dictionary definitions of "liberal" and "conservative?" When did they become pejorative epithets? However did it come about that it is the "conservatives" who are creating massive deficits and the "liberals" who are calling for fiscal restraint?

- Is it possible -- to quote Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank -- that life begins at conception and ends at birth? To listen to hard-core Republicans it would seem that the answer is a resounding "YES!" How else to explain why so-called conservatives spend so much time protecting the rights of the "un-born" [even down to proposing Constitutional amendments against further stem-cell research] and then cut funding for Aid to Families With Dependent Children, Food Stamps, Public Education, not to mention refusing to raise the minimum wage.
- Why are so many young men and women getting tattoos? How in the world can a 18 or 19-year old be so sure that the message or design they are affixing to their body today will still be something that makes sense 5, 10 or 20 years into the future? Yes, I know, fads come and go. But in this case, the fad cannot fade.
- I will never understand how a society that pays so much lip service to education can continue to pay its educators so very little and its athletes and entertainers so very very much. It is simply breathtaking to realize that people like Tom Cruise, Madonna, Rush Limbaugh, Kobe Bryant, Manny Ramirez and Dante Culpepper make more in *one week* than an average 6th grade teacher makes in *four years*.
- As long as I live, I will never grasp how it is that hearing a single four-letter word can do more lasting harm to a child than watching thousands of hours of violent videos, or how that same child is better off being shunted about from foster family to foster family than being adopted by a loving, nurturing couple who just happens to be gay.
- And while we're on the subject, who in the world ever figured out that despite monumental deficits, our current quagmire in Iraq, the tragedy of health care, the raping of our forests and a thousand-and-one other real challenges, that the most important issues center around gay men and women? It just doesn't make any sense at all.

If anyone has the answers to any of these questions, I hope they'll let me know. For despite the great education my parents provided, the thousands of books I've read and the all the experiences I've been fortunate enough to have, I'm really in the dark about so many things.

Perhaps it would have been easier if I'd become a shortstop . . .

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March 24, 2006 in Politics | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

March 30, 2006

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## ALL HAIL [Groucho] MARX and [John] LENNON

From the "just when you thought you'd heard it all" department:

Recently, South Florida State Senator Walter "Skip" Campbell put a bill into the hopper that would require companies with more than 10,000 employees to devote 9 percent of their payroll costs to health care. In Florida, that translates to Wal-Mart, Publix [the supermarket chain], Burger King and MacDonalds. Sounds like a logical, decent and much-needed piece of legislation, if you ask me. As the senator noted, he decided to sponsor the bill because "we noticed some people on Medicaid are working folks. Should citizens of Florida continue to pay their medical care or should companies that employ them contribute?" Again, seems to me like the proverbial no-brainer.

Of course, chances for the senator's bill to pass our Republican-dominated legislature are on a par with Common Cause naming Jack Abramoff or Tom DeLay their "Man of the Year." As a political realist, Senator Campbell, who is, to date, the sole Democrat running for Florida Attorney General, knows his bill has virtually no chance of success in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, Skip, who also happens to be one of the sharpest political minds in the Sunshine State, is a man who also knows that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. In his own words, "I know it's not going anywhere, but we need to start the debate now."

A cynic might conclude that Senator Campbell's visionary measure is nothing more than a campaign ploy -- a means of getting his name and campaign into

papers from Key West to Pensacola. I'm here to tell you that the cynics are wrong -- dead wrong. I've known Skip for nearly a decade -- he refers to me as "my rabbi" -- and can tell you that the man is a true believer. As the self-made son of working-class parents, he has long been a voice and an advocate for those who do their jobs, pay their taxes, raise their children, and still believe in the American Dream. In my humble estimation, Skip will make an outstanding Attorney General -- one whose only "special interest" will be the men, women and children of Florida.

How is it then that Senator Campbell stands accused of being nothing less than a dyed-in-the-wool Marxist? In two words: Barney Bishop. Who [or what], you may well inquire, is a Barney Bishop, and where in the world did he get the brass, the *chutzpah* to tar the good senator with the brush of Marxist Socialism? Well, Mr. Bishop is a high-powered Tallahassee lobbyist who represents the interests of -- you guessed it -- big business. To Mr. Bishop's way of thinking [and that of his clients], the only legitimate role for government is to protect, promote and defend the interests of that malevolent octopus called "Big Business."

In a message posted on his organization's Web site, Mr. Bishop, sounding like a Joe McCarthy retread, wrote, "We are absolutely opposed to mandatory health insurance. This is more appropriate for a socialist state." A socialist state? Does that mean Mr. Bishop considers England, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Canada, Israel and a couple of dozen other countries to be in the grip of godless Marxist ideology? In the same Web message, Bishop contended that "when I heard this dangerous proposal, I thought Karl Marx had risen from the dead and had assumed the bodies of extremist legislators . . ."

Karl Marx? Extremist legislators? Reading Bishop's manic broadside, I found myself thinking more of Groucho than Karl; a man with a twisted, off-kilter sense of reality. At least *that* Marx was funny. Labeling Senator Campbell's proposed legislation "Marxist" -- although humorous in a sick sort of way -- is an egregious insult to the needs -- not to mention the intelligence -- of all hard-

working Americans. But what can one expect from a man whose bread-and-butter [better make that croissants and Alouette] is putting more millions into the coffers and pockets of those who already have billions?

I for one am sick to death of hearing the big-money boys and girls refer to programs and proposals with which they do not agree as "ultra-liberal," "anti-Christian," or, in this case, "Marxist." By their overuse, these terms have become virtually meaningless. To label a person or a program "Socialist" is not far removed from one child calling another a "queer," a "creep" or a "spazz." At least in the case of the child, we can offer forgiveness; they simply don't know the true meaning of the epithets they hurl. But in the case of a supposedly educated, worldly man like Barney Bishop, no forgiveness can be forthcoming; he should know better. But then again, as it is stated in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun."

Back in the late 18th and early 19th century, the epithet of choice was "Mason." By the early 1840s, "Mason" was replaced by "Abolitionist." From there, the appellation of infamy became, variously, "Anarchist," "Socialist," "Communist," "Fellow Traveler," "Pinko," and the current favorite, "Ultra-liberal." And despite the vast differences between Masons and Anarchists, Communists and Liberals, these terms, when placed in the minds and mouths of self-serving buffoons, mean virtually the same thing: "I'm going to try and scare the daylights out of the masses so that they will side with my interests against yours."

Senator Skip Campbell is not a Marxist. Hell's bells, the man is a self-made multi-millionaire who owns five houses, flies his own helicopter, and has a wonderful plane with a superb pilot at his disposal. Skip is not a Marxist. What he is, is the American Dream personified; a man who, despite having become, through dint of hard work, vast intelligence and a great heart, a major success, has never forgotten that if the system is to work for anyone, it must work for everyone.

I for one will work just as hard as I can to ensure that Skip Campbell becomes Florida's next Attorney General. And once he takes the oath of office, I know that he will continue being both a voice for the voiceless and a friend to the friendless. Pay attention to Senator Campbell's candidacy; he is a man for the ages -- a term I do not use lightly.

Marx? Lenin? Perhaps old Barney has hit upon something without knowing it. Perhaps it is time we brought back Groucho and John, and returned Karl and Vladimir to the dustbin of history.

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March 30, 2006 in Politics | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

April 06, 2006

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## June Cleaver For President?

Ever get that eerie feeling that you must have been asleep at the switch; that somehow you missed out on a bunch of stuff that everybody else seems to know about? Well, that's how I've been feeling of late. Every time I read my local paper or listen to talk radio, it seems that somehow I must have slept through the 2006 midterm elections; that it's really April 2008, and we're now in the midst of presidential fever. Yikes! I must have been asleep for two years! Twenty-four months! One-hundred and four weeks! Seven-hundred and thirty days! Is it true? It must be.

How else to explain the Republicans' virtual kamikaze assaults on the person of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton? Why would so many Republicans be wasting so much ink and hot air on attacking a woman when, in reality, all she's running for is reelection to the United States Senate? If this is truly 2008, then perhaps it is understandable; after all, Republicans hate Senator Clinton the way a *hasid* abhors lobster. But its not 2008. It's 2006, and yet the good senator is nonetheless being accused of everything from duplicity and menopausal insanity to monomania and utter, contemptible hubris. Is this the best strategy the Republicans can field in their benighted attempt to hold on to the House and Senate in the upcoming elections? Is this a national strategy, to run against Hillary Clinton? What about issues? What about Iraq, the deficit, immigration, ethics in government, global warming and a thousand-and-one far more crucial matters?



Oh yes. I forgot. They can't run on these issues because they would have a tendency to remind the American voting public of what an execrable job they've been doing these past 6 years. Merely serving up the "*Remember 9/11!!*" fastball won't cut it. Democrats can score a lot of runs by taking aim at the likes of Tom DeLay, Jack Abramoff, Duke Cunningham and Dick Cheney , and likely clinch victory by running better, more honest, less imperial candidates than the GOP.

And yet, from the Republican perspective, it *is* 2008. They're trying to convince Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public that a vote for any Democrat is a vote for Senator Clinton. Boy oh boy: talk about a strategy from hell!

Of course, bashing Hillary Rodham Clinton is nothing new. Back in the latter 70s, when I was a student rabbi down in McGehee, Arkansas, I remember how Hillary was pilloried for her coke-bottle glasses, her absolute lack of style sense, and for using her maiden -- rather than her married -- name. Well, she got the message, got a pair of contact lenses, started wearing more fashionable clothes, and asked the press to begin referring to her as Hillary Clinton. [The "Rodham-Clinton" appellation would not come about for many years]. Then there was the bashing that took place when, during the 1992 presidential race, Mrs. Clinton told Barbara Walters that she simply wasn't a "cookie baking sort of mom." That went over like condoms in a convent. For weeks, the so-called "liberal media" hashed out whether it was better to have regal Barbara Bush or Ivy-educated Hillary Clinton as First Lady. Even the white-haired matriarch from Texas added her two cents, claiming that "I'm too much of a lady to tell you what I think about her, but it is a word that rhymes with w-i-t-c-h."

Then, when she did become First Lady, Hillary Clinton continued to be lambasted; for being too strident, too impatient, too authoritative. What America needed -- and expected -- we were told, was a First Lady who would stand by her man and perhaps take up an issue like highway beautification or the plight of the Ruby-throated Sparrow. What, and waste degrees from Wellesley and the Yale Law School? Not on your life.

As Senator -- and a darned good one at that -- she has continued to be the favorite target of radio talkers from Washington to Winnetka. And as speculation about her running for president in '08 increases, the volume and intensity of attack has manifestly increased. Just the other day, Joe Scarborough devoted an entire segment of his MSNBC program -- "Scarborough Country" -- to an expose on Senator Clinton; of how she had essentially trashed the White House. What? Trashed? According to Ronald Kessle, author of *Laura Bush: An Intimate Portrait of A First Lady*, Mrs. Bush was "quietly dismayed by the decor the Clintons left behind in the White House." Now there's an indictment!

Moreover, Scarborough and Company let us in on a deep dark secret: that Laura Bush "thought that not only were the [White House] carpets and furnishings fraying and in disrepair, but that the Oval Office was done in loud colors -- red, blue and gold -- and that the Lincoln Bedroom was outdated and needed updating." How's that for an overly repetitive redundancy?

Another Scarborough guest, Republican strategist Cheri Jacobus, firmly asserted that "taking care of the White House and the decor and keeping it in order is basically what the first lady does." Jacobus went on to claim [first-hand knowledge coming up here] that Mrs. Clinton "didn't want the job" because she wanted her husband's job." Scarborough agreed that Laura Bush is far more in keeping with the "traditional" First Lady model -- a model that Mr. Scarborough no doubt believes came down from Mt. Sinai. Haven't they ever heard of Eleanor Roosevelt, the archetypal First Lady who won over the nation with her energy, determination and political savvy?

To listen to all those who've been harping on Senator Clinton these past thirty years, one would think that America's feminine paragon was June Cleaver -- a woman who never had a hair out of place, always wore an apron, and seldom left the house. For my money, women -- whether they be doctors, lawyers, senators or First Ladies -- have come a long, long way since the days of Beaver

Cleaver's mommy. As the not-so-old bumper sticker said: "A Woman's Place is in the House -- and the Senate!"

Personally, I'm not sold just yet on the idea of Senator Clinton running for president. At this point in time, I would rather see her remain in the United States Senate; as I said above, she's one heck of a fine Senator. Perhaps I will change my mind by 2008; perhaps not. Nonetheless, I think its high time for America to see the Republican *"Bash Hillary at every turn and any cost"* strategy for what it is: a wet blanket thrown over the ashes of a politically, intellectually and morally smoldering heap of failure.

Perhaps its the Republicans who have been asleep . . .

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April 06, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

April 13, 2006

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## Behold: This Is The Dread of Conviction

For Jews the world over, this is the *paschal* week, the springtime festival when family and friends gather round a festive table and recount the Exodus from Egypt. Without question, Passover's overarching message -- that freedom beats slavery hands-down -- is universal in scope. As the great Laura Nyro wrote years and years ago, "All the world over it's so easy to see, people everywhere just gotta be free." It ain't brain surgery.

As every Jewish schoolchild knows, each object on the ceremonial Seder plate is fraught with symbolic meaning -- from the bowl of salt water, which reminds us of the tears our ancestors shed while enslaved, to that sweet concoction called *charoet*, which represents the mortar the Hebrew slaves used in building all those ghastly monuments to the pharaohs of Egypt. Standing supreme over all these and other symbols is, of course, *matza*, the flat, brittle, and entirely tasteless bread our ancestors made in the haste of their final liberation. In Aramaic, it is called *lachma anya*: "The bread of affliction."

To a non-Jew, the Passover table ritual might seem to be a bit of a snooze. After all, the pre- and post-meal service has remained remarkably constant for more than 2,000 years. Year in, year out, we recite the same prayers, read



same passages, and sing the same songs. A snooze? Not on your

*Tanta Frumeh.* For despite the familiarity and similarity of the Passover ritual, each year can and should be different. In what for me is the most Seder's most compelling passage, we are told: ". . . *even if we were all of us wise, all of us people of knowledge and understanding, all of us learned in the [Jewish] Law, it nevertheless would be incumbent upon us to speak of the departure from Egypt . . . and all of those who [do so] are accounted praiseworthy.*"

And so, we ask questions. Always questions. One question which arose at last night's Seder was particularly trenchant. "Why," our daughter Nurit asked, "if it took the sons of Jacob a mere six weeks to go from Egypt to Canaan, bury their father and then make the return trek from Canaan to Egypt, why did it take the Israelites forty years to make that same journey?" Why indeed? The answer, fortunately, is provided by the rabbis of old. And within their answer we find an incredible lesson that should be emailed to he who currently resides at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

According to the rabbis, God caused the Israelites to spend forty years in the wilderness because Co\* [see below] wanted to insure that none of those who entered Canaan -- the land of freedom -- would have been from the generation of the enslaved. Period. End of lesson. What does *that* mean? What's so incredibly brilliant about the answer? As we say, *Vell I'll tell 'ya:*

The rabbis of old recognized that between turning a free person into a slave and transforming a slave into a free person, the latter was the vastly more difficult [though praiseworthy] task. Freedom to slavery? Simple. Just point knives, spears, lashes, guns or bombs at a people, instill the fear of death into them and *voila!* . . . you've got instant slavery. But the opposite -- creating free people where once there was slavery -- that involves years -- perhaps generations -- of patient, deliberate instruction and role-modeling. And here is precisely the lesson that I wish to God our benighted president would have learned before setting his horrendous foreign-policy/military juggernaut into action. In terms that are simple enough for even "W" to understand, there is no way on earth that you can expect the slaves of Saddam to become democrats

overnight. Merely toppling the task master does not make the enslaved free. Without intelligent, deliberate, and thoroughly well-conceived plans for how to proceed once tyranny has been expunged, any future deed is little more than an act of fatuous sand-castle building.

One might hope -- even expect -- that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the Republican brain trust would have consulted something more than their own ego-driven, self-serving crystal balls before going into Iraq. It might have saved us from all the lies, kept hundreds of billions of dollars from disappearing down a bottomless rat hole, and spared thousands upon thousands of human lives. If only they had been thinking clearly, if only they had actually sought out the advice of those who truly understand how the world works, if only they hadn't believed their own lies -- like turning a mobile trailer for making weather balloons into a facility for manufacturing WMDs -- they might have actually stood a chance for transforming slaves into free men and women. But as things stand now -- and for what I fear will be years and years to come -- they have managed to turn Saddam's slaves into Rumsfeld's rebels. Yes, it was without question a positive good to depose Saddam. What has occurred since is, of course, a horse of a different colour.

Passover has long served the Jewish people as a goad; an eternal reminder that *people everywhere just gotta be free*. From generation to generation we have been warned that forgetting this lesson -- that taking our freedom for granting -- is tantamount to planting the seeds for future enslavement. Perhaps that is why we Jews have always been at the forefront of liberation movements -- whether it be as abolitionists in the mid-19th century or as civil rights marchers in the mid 20th. Each year, we eat the bread of affliction, taste the bitter herb of enslavement and seek new answers to age-old questions. And likewise, each year we rededicate ourselves to the liberation of those who are oppressed. But we are taught -- year in and year out -- that freedom comes with a patient price. That is something of which the Bush White House is blithely and willfully ignorant.

And because of that willful ignorance, they eat not the "bread of affliction," but, rather, contemplate the "threat of conviction."

*Chag samayach l'culahm* -- A Happy Passover to one and all!

And best wishes for a happy, meaningful Easter to all our Christian brothers and sisters.

\* *Co* is a gender-inclusive pronoun that I use for the Divine. It replaces the clunkier "He/She" or "He or She."

April 20, 2006

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## Of Prophets and Priests

They [whoever "they" may be] say that death always comes in threes. Sometimes they're right, and sometimes they're wrong. The first time I ever recall hearing this so-called truism given voice was way back in 1958, "the day the music died." That's when a plane went down, taking in a single horrific instant, the lives of rock icons Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and The Big Bopper. Sometimes its in twos: back on November 22, 1963, in addition to JFK, the British writer Aldous Huxley had the great misfortune of shuffling off this mortal coil. I say "to his great misfortune, for as a result of passing away on this precise date, his death -- which under any other conceivable circumstance would have been front-page news -- was, as Grandpa used to say, "buried beneath the truss ads on page 64."

Now mind you, deaths [whether in threes or twos] don't have to be on the same day in order to fulfill the nameless oracle's bit of wisdom. Back in late 1960/early 1961, within a matter of weeks, the world lost cinematic titans Clark Gable and Gary Cooper and popular singer ("The Ballad of New Orleans") Johnny Horton. And just this week, two giants of the religious world, The Rev. William Sloane Coffin and Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, both went to their great reward.

The rabbi and the reverend; the reverend and the rabbi. Sloane Coffin and Hertzberg; Hertzberg and Sloane Coffin. On the surface, they were two very dissimilar types: Hertzberg, an eastern-European Jew who immigrated to America in the late 1920s, and Sloane Coffin, the scion of an American family that could trace its lineage back to colonial days. Hertzberg, who spent his early years studying at an Orthodox Jewish yeshiva in Baltimore, and Sloane Coffin, who prepped at Phillips Andover and graduated from Yale. One became a Conservative rabbi, the other a Presbyterian Minister.



And yet, despite these -- and many other -- surface differences, the two men were remarkably similar in a host of other, vastly more intrinsic ways. Both spent years preaching from pulpits: Hertzberg at Temple Emanu-El in Englewood, New Jersey, and Sloane Coffin, first as Chaplain at Yale, and then, for many years at New York's magisterial Riverside Church. Both men burned with the fire of prophetic vision. Neither could sit on the sidelines, idly observing society's ills. Both firmly believed that their respective religious traditions -- Judaism and Christianity -- commanded them to be proactive agents of progressive change. As a result, both men became focal points in the American Civil Rights movement; both marched with Dr. Martin Luther King and rode busses with Southern Freedom Riders; both became voices for the voiceless; both were fearless in their pursuit of justice, mercy and equality.

Neither man could resist the arena of combat. According to Hertzberg, "A rabbi should be where the real issues of society are, not where the safe platitudes are to be preached." Sloan Coffin's take was much the same: "The prophetic role is the disturber of peace, to bring the minister himself, the congregation and entire social order under some judgment. If one plays a prophetic role, it's going to mitigate against his priestly role. There are going to be those who will hate him."

William Sloane Coffin became an icon to the entire generation of 60s anti-war activists. He was tireless in helping a generation of young men resist the draft, and unstinting in his efforts to bring about an end to nuclear weapons. For his efforts, Sloane Coffin was arrested, tried and convicted [along with the late Dr. Benjamin Spock] of conspiracy to aid and abet disobedience of the Selective Service Act. [Their convictions were later overturned.]

Arthur Hertzberg -- who lost most of his family in the Holocaust -- was instrumental in promoting and establishing the Catholic-Jewish dialogue that became one of the hallmarks of the papacy of John XXIII. In the early 1970s, the good rabbi chaired the first Jewish delegation to meet formally with

Vatican leaders and discuss the Church's complicity and silence in the murder of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis.

Today, our airwaves are filled with the faces, voices and cadences of a generation of preachers who, in comparison to Hertzberg and Sloan Coffin, have lost their moral compass. Their understanding of God, Jesus and Scripture often leads them to side with the so-called "haves and have-mores" while neglecting God's command that we clothe the naked, feed the hungry and provide for the homeless. Far too often, these blow-dried prophets of profit use religion as a wedge that essentially turns one segment of society against another, rather than as a compress that helps heal our wounds. Where Hertzberg and Sloane Coffin were always striving to improve a nation and a people for whom they had boundless love, the current crop seems to continence love for the unborn and disdain for those living in need.

From the perspective of 2006, its hard to believe that not so long ago, religious leaders were at the forefront of progressive movements; that men and women of faith put their faith on the line in order to make the world a better place for everyone. The way the Robertsons, Falwells, Dobsons and Kennedys carry on brings to mind an old bromide of Mark Twain: "Christianity's a fine religion that's never been tried."

Without question, the world is greatly impoverished with the passing of these two spiritual giants. Their courage, conviction and compassion made them ceaseless warriors in the battle for equality and human dignity. Its sad to report that were they just be beginning their respective careers in the early 21st century, they probably wouldn't be able to hold a job. For today, in-house religious leaders are often expected to be a combination of institutional executive and entertainer. To Hertzberg and Sloan Coffin -- the rabbi and the reverend -- the job (or calling, if you will) was one part prophet, and one part priest.

May their names, their memories and their achievements, be honored for generations yet unborn. And may a new generation of rabbis and reverends arise who, like Arthur Hertzberg and William Sloane Coffin, will burn with the fire of prophetic vision. As Sloane Coffin often said, "God loves you the way you are, but knows that you can do better . . ."

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

April 27, 2006

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## It's Getting To Be Howard Beale Time

I hope you all remember who Howard Beale was. To refresh our memories, he was the insane newscaster played by the great Peter Finch in the 1976 Sidney Lumet film "Network." If you will recall, when Beale's bosses, the executives of the fictional UBS television network decided their star anchorman was getting a bit long in the tooth, they handed him his pink slip. Well, old Howard took to the air ranting and raving, threatening to commit suicide on camera, and, in a classically memorable, maniacal peroration, proclaimed: "I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window. Open, and stick your head out, and yell, I'M MAD AS HELL AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE THIS ANYMORE!"

The upshot of Beale's on-camera meltdown was that he became an American icon, got his own daily half-hour program, and proceeded to "tell it like it is" until ultimately, his utter honesty did him in. "Network," of course, is pure satire which, as Molly Ivins reminds us is "the weapon of the powerless against the powerful." Well, I'm feeling a might powerless these days, and really want to do something about it.

"And so," you may well ask, "what's making you feel powerless this fine day? What's different about today than yesterday or the day before?" Let me tell you. While hovering over my word processor, busily sketching out an article on Global Warming -- the issue to end all issues -- I got a text message to call my cellular phone company ASAP. I knew exactly what they wanted. You see, I've

been fighting with them for more than six weeks now. Back and forth we go, them claiming that I am in arrears on my February payment, and me trying as nicely as possible to explain that according to my records [backed up by the good folks at my local bank], they received the payment weeks and weeks ago. Moreover, in a three-way conversation between me, my banking agent and one of the cellular company's drone-like representatives, we seemed to have nipped the snafu in the bud. That is, until today.

After listening to the recorded ten-minute list of options ["Press twenty-four to detonate nuclear device . . ."], and the disclaimer that "for purposes of efficiency, this call may be monitored" I finally reached a human being. Well, I think he was human. First he verified my cell phone number, which obviously had shown up on his I.D. caller. Then I told him my name, immediately after which he asked me to give him my name. How's that you ask? Why would he ask me for my name just a nano-second after I had given it to him? Probably because that was step #2 on his list of things to do. Remember, this is a person who likely makes little more than the minimum wage, probably hates what he does, and blindly follows orders. Next, he informed me that "for purposes of identification" I would have to supply him with the last four digits on my Social Security number.

"No thanks," I told the hapless drone. "I'm not going to give you any part of my Social Security number. I don't give out that information to anyone but the I.R.S., and then only under duress."

"Then I cannot speak with you about your account," he answered mechanically .

"By law, you cannot require my Social Security number as a means of identification." I waited for a response . . . a word, a cough, a sneeze . . . anything to let me know he was still on the line.

"Are you still there?" I asked. Hearing what I took to be an affirmative grunt, I continued: "And besides, if you have my cell phone number, you undoubtedly

already have my home address, marital status, the names of my pets, my Social Security number and, for all I know, my blood type as well." I told him all this with as much politesse as I could muster under the circumstances.

"Then I cannot speak with you about your account," he repeated.

"Look," I remonstrated, "I'll tell you why you called me, and that will prove that I am who I claim to be." I then gave him a quick twenty-twenty on the situation with the bill snafu, the three-way conversation we had had a few weeks back, and the cellular representative's conclusion that yes indeed, the problem must be on their part.

"If you will check the computer file under my cell number, I'm positive that you will find a record of this conversation," I said, with not quite so much politesse.

"One moment," he said, and put me on hold. I was on hold for precisely 13 minutes and 42 seconds, before I heard breathing on the other end of the line. Eureka! I thought. We're making progress!!

"So what did you find out?" I asked, a slight note of victory in my voice.

"I'm sorry, I cannot discuss this matter with you unless you give me the last four digits of your Social Security number."

At this point, I figured I had but two options: to put a hex on him, his ancestors and the company that employed him, or to merely say "thanks for nothing fella," and quietly ring off. Although I'm sure Howard Beale wouldn't agree, I chose option number two. Believe me, option one would have made me feel quite a bit better, but one does try to be a gentleman . . .

I am sure that most everyone has been through contretemps like this, and no doubt feels just as angry, just as powerless. It's not just a cell phone lackey mindlessly reading from a prepared script. It's not just being asked for the umpteen thousandth time to give someone my Social Security number [which I do not give out.] And its not just being made to feel like an ultra-microscopic

germ in the vast corporate body politic. No, its an overarching, overwhelming feeling that we -- the great collective "we" -- have all become bit players in someone else's tragicomedy. Nothing seems to work anymore. Our leaders only listen to those who have bottomless pockets. Teachers can't teach and students don't learn. Our foods are saturated with fat, sugar and petrochemicals. Our balance of payments is totally out of whack. The federal minimum wage hasn't been raised since Ben Franklin was in grade school. The entire globe has become just another venue for Wal-Mart. The people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast continue living in dire want while the folks in Washington continue sitting on their duffs. And on and on and on . . .

Poll after poll shows that we, the great American majority, are dissatisfied, disgruntled and suspicious. And yet, do you know what they're debating about this very week in the United States Senate? Whether to enact one Constitutional amendment that would make it a federal crime to burn the flag, and another that would make it illegal for any state, county or municipality to permit two people of the same sex to marry. Excuse me? This is what matters? Who in their right mind would ever believe that Congress would even *consider* Constitutional amendments that seek to *limit* individual freedoms? And at a time like this? Does the expression "Rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic" come to mind?

I for one think it's Howard Beale time; time for all of us to get out of our chairs, go to the window, and shout out that "WE'RE MAD AS HELL AND WE'RE NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANY MORE!!"

In this case, however, I am sure that Howard would want us to do a heck of a lot more than merely screaming out into the night. He would want us to roll up our sleeves, pick an area of concern, and then find like-minded people who also want to enact positive change. We cannot wait for some visionary to come along and give us a national challenge, for that challenge may never come. We cannot sit back and wonder just who we're waiting for to lead us out of the morass.

As a very bright fellow back in the Berkeley days use to say, "WE'RE THE PEOPLE WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR!"

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## **Beating the Bushes**

### **Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.**

**May 04, 2006**

#### **Who Cares About Tomorrow . . . Or The Day After?**

Back in 1970, Yale Law School professor Charles Reich published his classic *The Greening of America*. It, along with B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two* and Theodore Roszak's *The Making of the Counter Culture*, quickly became a must-read bestseller for members of my college generation. *The Greening*, unlike almost any other book being read by "the usual suspects" in Cambridge, New Haven, Morningside Heights, Berkley, Yellow Springs . . . [you get the idea] was a popular work of political sociology written by an immensely insightful author who seemingly had his finger on the pulse of "movement America." Employing words and ideas that neither assaulted vocabulary nor insulted intellect, Reich dissected Vietnam-era America and explained why things were the way they were. Moreover, he offered up a paradigm that was at once practicable to the mind of a pragmatist, yet audacious to the heart of a radical.

In *The Greening*, Reich wrote about what one might term "the toilet theory of American challenge." Reich posited that often, when faced with daunting, overwhelming issues, Americans act like children who flush objects down the toilet, never contemplating that what they are doing will likely cause a dangerous [not to mention disgusting] overflow in the future. As far as the child is concerned, the object [i.e. the social or political problem] is gone; any or all thought of what might happen tomorrow is outside the scope of concern. And while I doubt that President George W. Bush ever read -- let alone ever heard of -- *The Greening of America*, his approach to a vast array of issues is that of our prepubescent toilet flusher: out of sight, out of mind.

- What to bankrupt the national economy for the sake of the awesomely wealthy? Leave the debt for generations yet unborn. Let it be *their* problem.
- Determined to invade Iraq? Leave the consequences to future presidents.
- Need to keep OPEC and the multinationals in the big, big chips? Let our children and grandchildren deal with energy independence.
- And one and on. . .

The idea is, flush today, don't worry about tomorrow . . . or the day after.

To my way of thinking, the most noxious, most obscene example of the Bush Administration's "toilet theory of earthly problems" is their position -- or absolute lack thereof -- on the issue of global warming. While scientific study after scientific study conclusively proves that global warming is a devastating reality, the Bush Administration

and its Congressional Amen Corner claim to be thoroughly unconvinced. Rather, they understand all this claptrap about the utter -- and inevitable-unless-we-do-something-about-it-now -- destruction of Mother Earth as just more bugle oil emanating from the Cassandras of the anti-God Left. The Bushies want more input, more studies, more time to receive counsel from their allies at Exxon, Mobil, Shell and Haliburton. This administration is incredibly anti-science. Indeed, they are reminiscent of the medieval cretins who believed that Epilepsy, far from being a human malady, was in reality a sign of Satanic possession.

For those of us who live in the early 21st century and actually receive intellectual input from sources other than Karl Rove, we know beyond all doubt that polar icecaps are receding, that ocean levels and temperatures are rising, and that more and more creatures are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. We don't need to put the proposition to a vote; we know its all too frighteningly true.

And here, dear reader, is the ultimate issue for the 2008 Presidential election. For not only does global warming affect both the rich and poor, the urbanite and the farmer, the conservative Republican and the progressive Democrat; it affects every man, woman and child, every dog, cat and aardvark on planet earth. Increasingly, states, counties and municipalities throughout the United States are beginning to pay attention to global warming. More and more people are asking what they -- as individuals and as collectives -- can do to help stem its horrific tide. More and more companies are looking into alternate sources of energy, and marveling at countries like Brazil, which has achieved absolute energy independence. For you see, in launching a frontal assault on global warming, we also take aim at the entire issue of energy dependence, of OPEC, of \$4.00, \$5.00 and even \$10.00 a gallon gasoline.

I firmly believe that any presidential candidate who makes global warming a central issue of his or her presidential campaign, will find an enormous reservoir of public energy, good will and support. More and more, the American public is voicing extraordinary anger at -- and disaffection from -- the Bush administration and their minions. Increasingly, people are finally, finally, figuring out that those currently in power are far more concerned with today than with tomorrow . . . or the day after. Its all beginning to make Al Gore look like a prophet.

If I were running for president [God forbid!], I would announce that "my first action, to be taken at 9:00 a.m. on the morning after the Inauguration, will be a convocation with the scientific community. At this convocation will be experts in wind, solar, geo-thermal, wave and even anti-matter energy; engineers, inventors and environmentalists. And this convocation will include not only experts from this country, but experts from around the globe, for this is a global problem that must seek a global solution. Further, I pledge that we will achieve energy independence within a decade, creating hundreds of thousands -- perhaps even millions -- of new jobs in new industries. It will be the responsibility and the challenge of everyone in this great land to be part of the solution. Together, we will exercise the stewardship that the good Lord commanded in the Biblical story of creation."

Let's face it: one of the things we Americans have been lacking for nearly two generations is a national challenge; a call to achieving greatness. Now that we have conquered the challenge of outer space, it is high time that we turn our time, our attention, our talent and ingenuity toward the very earth we inhabit. We can no longer afford to flush our most overwhelming problems down the drainpipes of the future. We owe it to ourselves, our progeny and the God who created us, to mend this world, to begin treating it not as a toy, but as the most precious of all natural gifts.

Who cares about tomorrow . . . and the day after? We do. That's who.

May 04, 2006 in Current Affairs | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

**May 11, 2006**

## **A Different Planet**

Ever get the feeling that some people don't live on the same planet as the rest of us? Consider movie stars who buy their newborn sons and daughters \$30,000 slippers; preachers who preach fire and brimstone sermons that would be acceptable to 17th century Puritans; politicians who act as if the only Americans who matter are those with 6- and 7-figure incomes. I for one find it terribly hard to believe that the Cruises, Dobsons and Bushes *of* this world actually live *in* this world. For by their statements, actions and demeanor, they seem to be telling us that they are better -- indeed, far above -- the rest of us mere mortals who put in our forty-plus hours of toil, eat our three daily squares and then nod off sometime during Leno, Letterman or M\*A\*S\*H. How else to explain the willful blindness of the few toward the lives and realities of the many?

Take President George W. Bush and his diminishing legion of admirers as a prime example. How in the world could anyone living in real time, on a real planet, fail to see that people are finally, finally beginning to see through his elitist, holier-than-thou act? How indeed can he do it -- not see, that is? Well, for starters, how about by surrounding himself with -- and being surrounded by -- only those who agree with his politics, programs and proposals. How about by only speaking before -- and dining with -- those who see him as the crown of creation, God's gift to the "haves and have-mores." In reality, W lives at the center of a circle of impregnability where the only source of light shines from within, not from without.

Within the past 24 hours, it has been revealed in *USA Today* that the National Security Agency [NSA], which is part of this government made up of "we, the people," has spent the past five years creating the world's -- indeed history's -- largest database. This database, *USA Today* disclosed, contains information on every telephone call made by every American probably going back to the time when Alexander Graham Bell first shouted "Mr. Watson! Come quick, I need you!!" Moreover, this collection -- which has likely already logged in several *billion* calls and conversations, is being done with the acquiescence of A.T.& T., Verizon, and BellSouth, all of whom have apparently signed contracts and for all we know are being paid. And all of this, we are told by those inhabitants of distant planets, is being done in the name of "National Security" as part of our ongoing War Against Terror." Really! If this is so, then that means that the best way to safeguard the freedoms that the terrorists so badly want to destroy, is by curtailing them in the name of security and freedom. Even the great George Orwell would never have attempted to top this. It brings to mind a statement generally attributed to old Ben Franklin: "The man who is willing to give up a part of his freedom for the sake of security will wind up discovering that he has lost both."

Informed of the civilian-telephone-data-gathering project, Senate and House Democrats have voiced understandable anger, pique and outrage. Democrat Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member on the Senate Judiciary Committee angrily demanded to know if the Bush Administration really considers that the average American is in contact with Al Qaeda

terrorists. New York Representative Maurice Hinchey, who months ago wrote to the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility [OPR] seeking a fullscale investigation of the NSA's so-called "warrentless" wiretaps, has now been informed that the OPR investigators have been denied access to any and all information on the data-gathering project because they lack the required security clearances! In other words, those being investigated for suspected illegalities, are calling the shots and not permitting themselves to be investigated, all in the name of "National Security." Can you say "Constitutional crisis?"

Not to show off a better-than-average education, but this smarmy situation does bring a bit of classic wisdom to mind. To wit: *Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* which very loosely translated means "Never assign a fox to watch out over a henhouse."

Is it possible that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the rest really don't understand how dangerous, how dictatorial, illegal and downright Orwellian this whole NSA gambit is? Do they believe, when they put their heads on their pillows at night that all this is ultimately going to make America a safer place? If that is truly the case -- if they really and truly believe that what they are doing is in America's best interests, then we are in even worse trouble than we ever imagined. Why? Because it proves that our leaders must be visitors from a strange planet. No one with an ounce of intelligence, integrity or historic perspective could blithely condone universal eavesdropping on more than 200 million Americans. And by the way, as mentioned above, this program has been going on at the NSA for nearly five years. And who do you think was in charge of it until very recently? Why General Michael Hayden, the president's current nominee to head the CIA, that's who! Egad, I wouldn't want to be in his shoes or sitting in his seat when his confirmation hearings begin.

More than 35 years ago, I was working in a California governor's race in which our side was being outspent something like 5-to-1 by our opponent, a fellow named Ronald Reagan. Our candidate, through the campaign manager, instructed us that he wanted to see his name and face plastered over every square inch of the Golden State. None of us had the heart to tell him that we really didn't have the money, the time or the manpower to accomplish such a mission. However, not wishing to let "the old man" down, we came up with an alternate strategy. What did we do? Well, we put our guy's poster on just about every lamppost and telephone pole between his house and the building that housed our campaign headquarters. In that way, when he drove in in the morning and returned home at night, he was seeing literally thousands of posters. To his mind, we had done what he commanded; as far as he was concerned there *were* posters of him all over the place!

To a great extent, that is the type of world -- or planet -- in or on which George W. Bush lives. He sees what he wants to see, hears what he wants to hear, and stands foursquarely in the center of his circle of invulnerability. It is up to us -- the people of "we the people" -- to return our government and our nation to those who actually inhabit planet earth; to those whose vision is shaped by reality and historic perspective, rather

than by the fictive tales told by captains of industry who seem to feel that freedom is bad for business.

America was created to be a nation of laws, governed by law-abiding executives, sharp-eyed legislators and dedicated jurists. From what we read in Thursday's *U.S.A. Today*, America seems to have been taken over by inhabitants of a different planet. It's time to return our nation -- and our collective destiny -- to the inhabitants of planet Earth.

That's one small step for man . . . and woman.

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

May 18, 2006

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## The Pianists: A Fable

*(Note: The following was discovered on a papyrus scroll in a cave. Due to its extreme age, estimated at not less than 1,800 years old, there were many gaps (or lacunae) which made the text difficult to render . . .)*

Once upon a time long ago, a group of weary wanderers received a Divine Commandment from on high. It forever changed their lives. The resonating basso voice of the Nameless Muse said: “Thou has been chosen for greatness. Hear now this commandment that I command thee this day: Thou shalt become Piano Players and lovers of music. Throughout all thy generations, thou shalt diligently teach thy children to study and to practice, to play and to love, the music of the Piano. For Piano is thy life and the length of thy days. It shall add glory, meaning and contentment to thy lives. Piano shall fulfill thy souls. I am thy Muse.”

To facilitate their lives, Co [a gender-neutral pronoun used for The Divine] gave them a manuscript with explicit step-by-step instructions on how to build a proper piano. To further guide them along their path, the Muse also provided the Piano Players (or “Pianists”) with The Holy Score, which contained Sonatas, Fantasies, and Concertos, Partitas, Trios and Quartets. Needless to say, those hearing the Muse’s Divine Directive were moved beyond compare; slowly they began seeking the means to fulfill Co’s awesome decree. This they did throughout their generations, as they continued wandering the wilderness, ever searching for their place in the sun.

After many years of meandering, the nascent Pianists did find a permanent home in a land they called “Pastoral.” Once settled, they began devoting their lives to Piano and its attendant joys. Over many generations, they became renown for the skill and artistry, the dedication and single-mindedness with which they fulfilled their Prime Command. They endlessly studied the Holy Score, adding variations and brilliantly original compositions of their own. They were a happy people living happy, creative lives. But there were dark clouds on the horizon. . .

Other peoples and cultures (whom they simply referred to as “Outsiders”) mocked them and scorned them. They seemed so different. In a sense, they were. For owing to the extreme discipline required in order to become players of Piano and lovers of music, the Pianists generally lived by apart from all others. They even developed their own language with which to speak amongst themselves; they called it “P’santayr.” Not having been witness to the original Command on High, Outsiders could not understand the commitment and devotion with which the Pianists lived their lives. They kept strange hours and seemed to do nothing but practice, practice, practice. They played pieces from the Holy Score religiously three times each day. One day in seven they rested, doing nothing but attending the Odeon - their place of musical devotion. They dressed alike and all ate high protein diets. They rarely participated in activities that the Outsiders considered “important” or “necessary.” How, the Outsider’s wondered, could any people devote so much of their lives to something as frivolous and nonproductive as Piano playing and music?

Because of their uniqueness, they were often persecuted. In fact, many Outsider cultures tried to eliminate them. Many believed that the Piano Players were an powerful, monolithic force bent upon taking over the entire world. Strangely, others saw in the Piano Players an inherent weakness that made them susceptible to the will of the devil. Against all reason, the Outsiders became convinced that the Piano Players believed themselves to be better than everyone else, although this certainly was not the case. True, the



Muse had long ago informed the Pianists that they were Co's "Chosen People." But that did not make them better - only chosen. But Chosen for what? Why to be Players of Piano and devotees of music -- not an easy task when you think about it. No, they were not better, but they *were* different and unique. Unfortunately, many people could not [and still cannot] understand that people who are "different" or "unique" need not be feared.

After generations of living extraordinary lives in Pastorage, the Pianists were conquered by Outsiders and forced to leave their homeland. Before long, they were dispersed to the four corners of the earth. As the generations came and went, the Piano Players contributed greatly to the countries and cultures in which they found themselves living. They continued to be persecuted and scorned for their uniqueness. To the Outsider way of thinking, they just didn't fit in. Nonetheless, they did continue to provide both themselves and the entire world with sonatas, concertos and symphonies of dazzling brilliance and profundity. They created a body of musical literature that covered virtually every emotional aspect of life. No matter where they found themselves in the wide world, they continued to study, to play, and to luxuriate in the heavenly music they had been commanded to create. It gave their lives meaning and purpose, just as the Muse had predicted. And, despite the fact that they were grossly misunderstood and even harmed, music continued to be the central focus of their lives - the driving force that kept them together as a people.

After 2,000 or more years, the Pianists lived in almost every country in the world. Never vast in number, they were nonetheless believed by the Outsiders to be an enormous monolithic congregation. In a sense, one can readily understand how the Outsiders might reach this unwarranted conclusion. Because of their unique culture and common purpose, they felt themselves to be a single family. There was a singular global connection. Since all Piano Players adhered to roughly the same daily ritual of practice and study, they understood each other's lifestyles, needs and expectations. And since they all spoke "P'santayr," they could communicate with one another whenever the need arose.

For countless generations, Pianists would only marry amongst themselves. This they felt to be their sacred obligation. Whenever or wherever a community of Pianists might suffer, their fellows could always be counted on to come to their aid. Additionally, when finally permitted to enter mainstream professions - law, medicine, banking and academics - the Pianists tended to become rather successful. This was due in great part to the tremendous discipline and love of learning that had been instilled in them throughout all their generations. Simply stated, they approached each and every challenge as if it were part of the Holy Score. The Outsiders - perhaps through jealousy, envy, or sheer ignorance - had a tendency to look upon their success as positive proof that the Pianists were international conspirators - evil people bent upon taking over the entire world. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

With the arrival of modern times, many strange things began to occur amongst the Piano Players. They found the pull of Outsider society to be increasingly strong and alluring. The time they devoted to playing Piano and studying music became less and less. While most considered themselves devoted Pianists in the cultural sense, many turned from age-old forms of study and practice. They no longer trained their children for a lifetime of playing and love of music. Why? Many said that they were deeply concerned lest their children feel “odd” or “strange” around their Outsider neighbors. No longer did they play Piano three times a day, as had their ancestors. Rarely did they attend the Odeon on the Seventh Day. No longer did they steep their children in the musical culture of their grandfathers and grandmothers.

Rather, now they began sending them to twice-weekly lessons for three or four years in order to learn to play but a single piece of Piano music - and largely by rote at that. The parents rarely, if ever, took their children to the Odeon on the Seventh Day. In far too many homes, the children were unable to practice, for the parents did not even have a Piano. The message these children often received was: “Piano must be important to you for the next several years.”

“Why?” their children would ask.

“Because we say so,” the parents would answer.

Often they would add: “But, if after you have completed your lessons, you do not want to continue, that will be your decision.” The children questioned why something that should be important to them was rarely seen or heard within their own homes. It was a very good question, a very good question indeed.

It eventually became the custom that at the age of thirteen, each child would play his or her single piece of music at a glorious recital that would be attended by family and friends. Plans for the recital (and the banquet that would follow) began years before the child knew how to locate Middle C, or had ever heard of Bach, Beethoven or Brahms. The day of the recital was filled with tension and anxiety, lest the child not “perform” up to capacity. It became increasingly obvious that many of those who attended these recitals did not have the slightest idea of how to act or what to expect. They had become, in short, a musically illiterate folk.

Many of those in attendance would recall their own recitals, and realize that it was really the last time they had ever played Piano, attended the Odeon, or devoted themselves to music. Some would remember their parents and grandparents, and how they devoted their lives to the pursuit of Piano and music. But these children - the ones who played the single recital piece - were different. Despite the fact that they might play their single piece with ability and skill, they were incapable of reading the musical score or recognizing its worth. Moreover, few, if any, had the true love of music, which the Muse had long ago commanded. True to form, few would ever play Piano after their recital. This new generation merely went through the motions without much feeling or understanding. What they did understand, was that after the recital, they would receive gifts of money. After the performance, the family would throw a magnificent banquet that would last until all hours of the night. Quite often these festivities cost far more than the family could truly afford.

The elders grew fearful. “How silly it is to spent all that time and money just to teach our children a single piece of music,” they said. “And for what? For the sake of a single recital and a great feast? It is a tragedy. Our children no long truly know how to play Piano, speak ‘P’santayr,” or have that great love and devotion to music which has always been our heritage. Where will it all end?”

But the elders came to realize that they were, at least in part, to blame. They were the ones who took to speaking “P’santayr” only when they did not wish their children to understand. Then too, they were the ones who let the very culture of Piano slowly slip through their fingers, preferring instead the ways of their non-Pianist neighbors.

Fortunately, the elders, working in consonance with their children and grandchildren, came up with a solution that not only solved their growing problem, but actually caused a musical renaissance among the Pianists. In short, they . . .

*(At this point, the manuscript suddenly ended, leaving posterity to ponder just what the solution was).*

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

May 26, 2006

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## There's Good News Tonight . . .

Gabriel Heatter was one of America's most recognizable voices during the 1930s and 40s. Heatter [1890-1972] was a preeminent radio commentator whose nightly sign-on -- "There's Good News Tonight!" became both his catchphrase and his caricature. Working in a far, far less media-driven and cynical time, Heatter earned a reputation for being a morale-booster during some of this nation's darkest days. As popular and revered a figure as ever graced American media, Heatter regularly received fan-mail thanking him for . . . well, for just being Gabriel Heatter. One letter-writer gushed: "Thank God for Gabriel Heatter, who makes it possible for us to sleep at night."

Imagine, if you will, any media personality -- whether of the left, the right or the militant-far-middle -- beginning a broadcast with such a saccharine salutation as "There's Good News Tonight!" He or she would likely be accused of being nothing better than a bathetic fool. Amazing to what tenebrous depths we moderns have all sunk.

Throwing fistfuls of caution to the winsome winds of yesteryear, I too declare "There's Good News Tonight!" [or, to be more accurate, 'this morning.']

"Harrumph!" cry out cynical masses.

"Balderdash!" shout the jaded hoard.

"What's so good about the news tonight?" demand the hoi polloi? "Are you so brain dead as to be unaware that while the NSA is listening in on our

conversations, the have-mores are getting even more and the polar icecaps are fast becoming tepid puddles, that illegal aliens are storming our citadel, Christianity is under attack and the Kansas City Royals have lost 13 straight?"

Oh yes, we're aware of all that, but nonetheless, there *is* good news out there. To wit:

- As of the moment [Friday, May 26, approximately 11:00 a.m.], the Dodgers have won 7 straight and Nomar Garciaparra is hitting the cover off the ball as if it were 1999 all over again.
- Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, despite their absurd Nuremberg defense ["we didn't know what was going on"] were both found guilty of innumerable counts of fraud and destroying the lives of literally thousands of American investors. If all goes right, they will be eligible for parole in the early 23rd century.
- House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi have actually -- and finally -- found something upon which they can agree: that the Bush Justice Department crossed an inviolate line by raiding the offices of Representative William Jefferson. This -- and a host of other niggling issues -- are beginning to put a strain on White House/Congressional relations.
- Congressional Republicans, fearful for their political lives, are beginning to distance themselves from Bush/Cheney/Rumsfeld *et al.* Moreover, it would seem that they are finally beginning to understand that their boss is in a race with Tom Cruise for who can suffer the most precipitous decline in public popularity.

Along these lines, there's plenty of good news brewing out here in the American political hinterland. In preparing a new edition of my book *The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill*, I conduct interviews with members of Congress and various candidates who, in my estimation stand a good chance of victory in November. One thing that impresses and excites me

is the quality -- the caliber -- of the Democrats running for office. They are far from being the directionless, brain-dead ultra-left, latte-slurping sensualists that the boys and girls at FOX portray them to be. Time and again, I find myself talking with men who are far more positive, energetic, dedicated, and visionary than the folks they are seeking to replace. In the main, our conversations deal with "the politics of the possible." These are people whose concerns are the concerns of "Mr. and Mrs. America and All the Ships at Sea:" security [both national and economic], universal health care, education, global warming, jobs, and an end to that "culture of corruption" which has reached epidemic proportions in Washington. What I have *not* been hearing is all that ponderous prattling about "God, Guns & Gays," the Republicans' less-than-holy trinity.

This is not to say that this new breed lacks a moral compass or anchor. Quite the contrary. These men and women are every bit as religious as those who wear their faith like some designer hair shirt. Where they differ is in the understanding that faith -- like words -- are irrelevant without actions.

Florida State Senator Ron Klein, who is running a remarkably hopeful campaign to unseat 13-term incumbent Clay Shaw is a perfect example of the sort of candidate who makes us say that "There's Good News Tonight!" A member of the Florida Senate since 1996 [he served in the lower house for four years prior to that], Klein is the sort of man for whom politics is not a profession, but rather an avocation -- a way in which to put his values to work on behalf of people. To a man like Senator Klein, health care *is* a moral issue. Global warming *is* a moral issue. Peace in the Middle East *is* a moral issue. In speaking with him, one hears next to nothing about what is economically viable or advantageous. Rather, he talks about what is right, proper and utterly necessary. The senator is that enviable mix of idealist and pragmatist, of wide-eyed optimist and veteran realist. Nowhere in our conversation did he once -- not once -- mention anything about his opponent. To Senator Klein, campaigns are not about tearing one's opponent apart limb by limb, but rather

setting out a positive agenda of action that can and will affect the lives of the people he represents. His are not the politics of fear and preachy, exclusive divisiveness. Rather, his is the campaign of hope, dedication and inclusiveness. Senator Klein will make an exemplary member of Congress.

Senator Klein is but one of dozens upon dozens of challengers across this great land who could actually score upset victories come November. For this to happen however, it will take a lot of money, a lot of people power, and a lot good will. I for one believe that people from Vermont to California and from Florida to Washington State possess all three. Goodness knows we've got the candidates.

May the Good News continue to be ours . . .

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May 26, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

June 01, 2006

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## Let Them Drink Beer

Down here in Ft. Lauderdale, the deepest part of the Deep South, we have a mayor named Jim Naugle. A few days ago the mayor, who is in his final term, outraged much of the local citizenry by rhetorically asking "I'm supposed to subsidize some schlock sitting on the sofa drinking a beer, who won't work more than 40 hours a week?" Naugle's ludicrous comment was in response to a proposed affordable housing law, which has him and his developer buddies [the same buddies who love to fill his campaign coffers] seeing . . . well, red.

According to terms of the proposed law, downtown developers would set aside a small percentage -- \$1.5 million on a 100-condo complex for example -- for the good of the community. The city law would have residential developers help pay for affordable housing, either by providing it within their housing complexes, or paying fees to a trust fund to subsidize housing for middle-class families. "Aaarh!" shouted an aggrieved Mayor Naugle. Then taking a page out of "The World According to Joe McCarthy," proclaimed that "The concept of this ordinance is from each according to his ability to each according to need . . . which is the Communist Manifesto." Weeping and wailing, Naugle proclaimed that the proposed ordinance was nothing short of a "luxury housing tax."

Predictably, responses to Naugle's intemperate comments have filled the letters to the editor page of the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*. One irate citizen wrote that "*Mayor Jim Naugle has captured the crown of political incorrectness*

for his arrogant, pompous, snobbish, callous, thoughtless -- hey, there just aren't enough adjectives to describe his statements." Callous and thoughtless indeed. Moreover, Naugle should go to a Yiddish/English dictionary and look up the word *schlock*. The word, which comes from *shlak*, meaning "apoplexy," "stroke," "evil," "wretch," or "nuisance," currently carries the meaning "something, such as merchandise or literature, which is of inferior quality." When used properly, *schlock* cannot refer to a person. Perhaps the word the mayor is looking for is *schlub*. Ah well, what can one expect from such a *mitlmawsikyt* -- such a mediocrity?

To be fair, Naugle's outrageous comments about indolent beer-swilling couch potatoes did draw praise -- from no less an authority than Rush Limbaugh. And who better than Limbaugh -- he who earns \$20 million a year and lives in a Palm Beach mansion roughly the size of Idaho -- would understand people who cannot afford to purchase a two-bedroom home despite working two or more jobs?

Naugle's comments bring to mind a quip by the conservative columnist George Will: "Politicians fascinate because they constitute a paradox; they are an elite that accomplishes mediocrity for the public good." Well, I don't know if Mayor Naugle can be considered part of the "elite" -- though he is a millionaire many times over; I do know that he is definitely, as referenced above, a "mediocrity."

Beyond this, it strikes me that Naugle is nothing less than a first-class poster child for the Bush-inspired "grab-yours-while-you-can" times in which we live. In other words, Naugle is anything but *sui generis*. He is but an infinitesimal cog in an oligarchic machine that empowers corporate CEOs to receive \$100 million-plus pay packages and then cuts taxes on their pelf. He is a vivid reminder of a Congress that meekly acquiesces to hundreds of billions of dollars for our war in Iraq and then turns around and cuts every imaginable benefit for the very military personnel who are fighting that battle. Naugle is stereotypic

of those politicians who appropriate millions to build bridges where there are no rivers, and pennies for schools that have no books.

Some years back during a presidential election cycle, a reporter asked one of the candidates what the current cost of a quart of milk was. The candidate didn't have the slightest idea. Heck, the candidate probably hadn't entered a grocery store since the day he was elected -- if ever. In far too many cases, we are willingly electing men and women to national office whose grasp of everyday life with its commonplace challenges is breathtakingly exiguous. We currently have an executive branch that is composed of interlocking directorates; men and women who went to the same schools, belong to the same clubs, and inhabit the same vaporous empyrean. Their message to America seems to be "We've got ours . . . the hell with you." Even those -- like Vice President Cheney and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales -- who were originally people of extremely modest means, have willfully forgotten what it's like to be a middle-class working stiff.

It reminds me of a friend of my parents from years ago. Ilsa, a girl from the Lower East Side, married a world-class artist. With her entry into the so-called "Jet Set," Ilsa conveniently forgot her roots. To look at or listen to her, one would have imagined that her forebears had come over on the Mayflower, rather than in steerage. I remember a dinner party at my parents' home where Ilsa was going on and on about something. "I cahn't," she said, I simply cahn't . . ." Ilsa said, using her phonier-than-a-three-dollar-bill Hollywood British accent. Then, catching herself, she continued "so I just said the hell with it!" sounding for just a second like the girl from Second Avenue she truly was. Her moment of honest self-deprecation brought quite a laugh from those assembled around the table -- perhaps none more than Ilsa herself. It's just too bad that more people can't remember from whence they came and occasionally -- just occasionally, puncture the balloon of their own elitism.

So, to the Jim Naugle's of the world I say this: shame on you. Shame on you for willfully forgetting that those who work 40-plus hours a week just in order

to put food on the table are the backbone of America. Shame on you for treating the middle class as if it were nothing more than a bunch of illiterate peons. Shame on you for walling yourselves off from the challenge --and the promise of the American experience: *e pluribus unim* -- "Out of many, come one."

And while we're at it, shame on you Jim Naugle, for living in Broward County all these years and still not knowing the difference between *schlock* and *schlub*.

Why don't you ponder *that* while sitting on your couch sipping a cold one?

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

June 08, 2006

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## The Queen of Mean

We begin with a story -- a true story. On the first day of graduate school, the dean of our department -- a world-renowned scholar -- gathered all the incoming students together for greetings and orientation. It was the first time that we -- the graduate newbies -- were getting the chance to meet the young men and women with whom we would be learning, sweating, hoping and growing over the next half-decade. We had fought like cats and dogs to get into this exclusive program, and now, it was time for the dean to scrape away the patina of our personal pride and give us an idea of the staggering amount of work we could expect to come our way. As I recall, he did better than that; frankly, he scared the living daylights out of us all.

"I want you all to know," he said at one point, "that each of you has been admitted to this program for a particular reason. It goes without saying that your academic achievements have played a major role." We all smiled; what a rush being complimented by such a scholastic giant!

"But academics weren't the sole reason for your being honored with admission," he continued. "Each of you brings to this program a set of skills, abilities and personality traits that will make it possible for you to learn not only from the faculty, but from one another."

"You see," the dean went on, "one of the keys to the contemplative life is the ability learn something from everyone we meet -- both the positive and the negative." We started looking around at one another, wondering where all this was leading. Smiling the devilish smile that we would eventually come to know

very well, he concluded "at least one of you has been admitted in order to act as an exemplar of what not to be. Eventually, you will figure out who those students are. And I am here to tell you that the lesson of what not to be is just as important, just as valuable as anything you will ever learn in this graduate program." And with these words, he invited us to join him for tea . . .

I was reminded of the dean's sage advice the other day while listening to Ann Coulter -- the "Queen of Mean" -- hawking her latest book, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*. Ms. Coulter, former columnist and pundit for MSNBC and *The National Review*, is well known for her acidic, beyond-the-pale frontal attacks on Democrats, liberals, gays, environmentalists, gun-control advocates and virtually every aspect of post "Ozzie and Harriett" society. The author of such bestselling works as *How to Talk to a Liberal [If You Must]*, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right*, and *High Crimes and Misdemeanors: The Case Against Bill Clinton*, Coulter is the poster-child and chief cheerleader for the far-right punditocracy.

To give her her due, Ann Coulter is a very bright woman. She knows precisely where and how to attack the progressive political jugular. She has an innate sense for where the liberal belt line is, and is generally able to hit right beneath it. Among her more outrageous comments are:

- "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the planets, the animals, the trees. God said 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" [Hannity & Colmes, 6/20/01]
- "The only Democrats who go to church regularly are the ones who plan to run for president someday and are preparing in advance to fake a belief in God." [Column, 1/8/04]
- "The portrayal of Senator Joe McCarthy as a wild-eyed demagogue destroying innocent lives is sheer liberal hobgoblinism." [*Treason*, p. 10]
- "I often refer to Christians and Christianity because I am a Christian and I have a fairly good idea of what they believe, but the term is used to

*include anyone who subscribes to the Bible of the God of Abraham, including Jews and others . . ."* [Godless: The Church of Liberalism, p. 3]

Most recently, Coulter has been on a rampage against four 9/11 widows who have had the audacity to criticize President George W. Bush. Coulter blithely refers to them as the "Jersey girls," and claims that they are using their "victimhood" to express their radical liberal opinions. "Do I have to kill my mother so that I can be a victim too?" Coulter recently asked. Moreover, she has accused the four of being nothing more than Democratic plants -- this despite the fact that at least two of the four are Republicans who voted for George W. Bush in 2004. Even more egregiously, Coulter stepped way over the line and suggested that had they lived, the four men would likely have divorced their wives! Now I'm not a lawyer, but it seems to me that someone should look into the possibility of a legal case here . . .

Can Coulter really, truly believe everything she writes and says? Well, if we are to take her at her word, the answer is a resounding YES!! Ann has gone on record time and again proclaiming that her every pronouncement meets with her personal approval -- tantamount to God's Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. It seems to me that we have no recourse but to take Ann Coulter at her word and believe that she believes what she says.

And for all she says, all she writes, all the bilge she spews forth, I can only say: "Thank you, dear Ann. Thank you for teaching us several invaluable lessons in what not to be or think."

To wit:

- Thank you for teaching us that it is wrong to hope and pray for the utter extirpation of those who disagree with us. No one has a corner on the market of truth. If everyone believed or espoused precisely the same thing, then the very fabric of Democracy would be irreparably damaged. Thank you for causing us to remember that "I may not agree with you,

but I'll fight to the death your right to hold your opinion" is as much an American tradition as hot dogs, apple pie and the Fourth of July.

- Thank you, dear Ann, for reminding us that if beauty is to be real, it must more than skin deep. There are those who find you physically alluring [I am not one -- my tastes run toward brunettes with more meat on their bones]. However, whatever beauty the eye may behold in seeing you on television is more than offset by the atrocities that come out of your mouth. You may look like a siren, but you sound like a harriidan.
- And thanks especially, dear Ann, for teaching us a very valuable lesson about religion. You cause us to understand that anyone who claims to know the mind, the will or the intent of God is nothing more than a false prophet. By your words and actions, you have also given ample proof that there is nothing more sacrilegious than questioning or deriding another person's faith. I do not find anything remotely compelling in your theology, teleology or eschatology. But I would be loathe to proclaim that my beliefs are the will of God and that yours spring from the devil.

So, dear Ann Coulter, thank you for proving that our dean was correct: one can learn something valuable from virtually anyone. You, dear Ann, have that knack for reminding us that being the "Queen of Mean" is not a royal title; it is, as Grandpa would have said, a *shanda* . . .

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

June 15, 2006

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## They Shoot Messengers, Don't They?

Took in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* two nights ago. Upon entering the theatre, we [yours truly, my wife Anna and 24-year old environmental activist daughter Nurit] were taken aback to discover that we pretty much had the theatre to ourselves; not too many people ventured out for the 8:15 screening. Tis' a pity, because we found *An Inconvenient Truth* to be a work of breathtaking, uncompromising honesty. Lightly seasoned with Al Gore's new-found sense of humorous self-deprecation ["Hello, I'm Al Gore, the former next president of the United States"], *An Inconvenient Truth* presents, in awesome cinematic detail, a "docu-sermon" on the plight of Mother Earth in the early 21st century.

As many cognoscenti know, Al Gore -- the self-confessed "recovering politician" -- has been consumed -- one might even say obsessed -- with the degradation of planet earth ever since his undergraduate days at Harvard in the 1960s. For years and years, he has traveled the world, observing first-hand what humankind has wrought in such far-flung places as the South Pole, the Himalayas, and the Amazon. For more than a generation, he has also traveled the world presenting a haunting, utterly disquieting slide show on what's been going on with our climate, our lakes, seas, polar icecaps, forests, flora and fauna human. Offering a welter of incontrovertible scientific facts, it is obvious that Gore has mastered the subject of Global Warming. His message is both deeply profound and utterly clear: unless we -- the people of the United States -- in partnerships with all our neighbors on Planet Earth don't begin taking positive, lifestyle-altering steps, our planet will lose the ability to

support and sustain life. For anyone who wants or needs more information, confirmation or even a kick in the pants on the subject, I highly recommend your logging on to [www.climatecrisis.net](http://www.climatecrisis.net)

Al Gore's role in the entire Global Warming "universe" is far more prophetic than political. But as with most prophets, he is being hounded, debased and held up to ridicule. As we are reminded in the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun." One recalls a comment from the late Carl Jung: *"The wise man who is not heeded is counted a fool, and the fool who proclaims the general folly first and loudest passes for a prophet and Fuhrer, and sometimes it is luckily the other way around as well, or else mankind would have long since perished of stupidity."*

Cynics and naysayers -- those who, like our president believe that the jury's "still out" on the reality of Global Warming -- would rather fight Gore tongue and jowl, belittle his facts and belabor his arguments, than sit down and listen to the message and contemplate the reality. They nibble away at the edges of his facts, the studies he presents, whether the oceans have receded at "X" or "Y" feet per year. It all reminds me of that old saw about "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

"Yeah, right," one woman emailed me yesterday. "Al Gore, he's the idiot who also claimed to have invented the Internet. How in the world are we to believe anyone who makes such a self-centered, idiotic claim -- especially when he served eight years as Clinton's vice president?"

"Oh, its just more of the same liberal scare tactic claptrap," another person wrote. "He's just trying to give himself an issue so he can run for President in 2008 . . . as if anyone in their right mind would vote for someone that out of touch with reality."

What's going on here? Am I crazy, or does it seem that these two [being mere exemplars of a smoldering but mouthy minority] are just as interested in dissing Al Gore the man as in dismissing Al Gore's message? Have we tragically

reached a point where anyone seeking to present a profound, deeply disturbing truth, must first pass some arbitrary moral muster? Do progressive, forward-thinking politicians get but a single chance? Sadly, the answer may well be yes. Consider:

- Howard Dean accomplished many good and positive things in his 12 years as Vermont Governor. Nonetheless, he will forever be remembered for one thing and one thing only: "the scream."
- Delaware Senator Joseph Biden has been a remarkably effect, foresighted legislator for more than 35 years. He is also one of the best communicators in Americana public life. Regardless of all this, for far too many, the senator will always be remembered as having been the guy who cadged a bit of British Labour M.P. Neil Kinnock's biography back in the late 1980s.
- Regardless of how important, compelling and absolutely necessary his message certainly is, for millions and millions Al Gore remains the man who said *"During my time in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet."* OK, his off-the-cuff comment wasn't the greatest, but only an idiot would conclude that Gore was claiming to have "created" the Internet. But the truth of the matter is that as a representative and then a senator, Al Gore did the lead work on numerous bills that united various government systems, so that they could talk to one another. He also authored "High Performance Computing and Communications Act of 1991," [commonly called "The Gore Act"], which provided the initial funding so that that which would eventually become known as the Internet could make the move from laboratory to public. [It should be mentioned that when confronted with the "I invented the Internet" statement, Gore's response was both good-natured and self-deprecating: *"The day I made that comment I was tired because I'd been up all night inventing the Camcorder."*]

If we progressives wanted to begin exercising selective, stereotypic memory, there would be plenty to keep us busy:

- We could continually remind the public that former House Speaker-turned-political-pundit-and-potential-future-presidential-candidate Newt Gingrich is the man who served his about-to-become-third-ex-wife with divorce papers when she was anesthetized and about to under major surgery.
- How about publicizing the fact that the man Republicans picked to succeed Gingrich as Speaker -- Representative Bob Livingston of Louisiana -- had to resign even before confirmation, due to having engaged in numerous sexual indiscretions.
- And lest anyone forget, before he was called "The Hammer," former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was called "Hot Tub Tom," due to . . . what else? Spending far more time wining, dining and lobbying in his Texas hot Tub than being on the floor of the Texas Legislature.

We could, but we don't. Why? Probably because progressives have an understanding of good taste, and, more often than not, a desire to put issues ahead of personalities. This is not to say that progressives are all great knights and ladies in shining white armor and conservatives the political scum of the earth. Far from it. Both sides have political paragons; both sides have political perverts.

But is it any wonder that so many good people who have talent, ideas and energy refuse to enter public life? And its not that they all have 12-foot skeletons hanging in their hall closets, and are fearful of being "found out." No, I don't think its the existence of 12-foot skeletons; its the realization that as fallible mortals, we rarely get more than one mistake. Politics today is a "one-strike-and-you're-out" proposition. As we see with the likes of Al Gore -- a man who is doing everything in his power to help us learn how to save this planet -- they shoot messengers, don't they?

But the real question is "why?"

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June 15, 2006 in Reflection | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

June 22, 2006

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## Immigration: The Sincerest Form of Flattery

Back in the days when the only Roosevelt Americans were aware of was Theodore, a young boy arrived at Ellis Island. Though only 7 or 8, he had had to travel all the way from Russia/Poland to America on his own; a case of Trachoma had forced his mother to leave him behind. Somehow, the little fellow, a trans-Atlantic ticket pinned inside his blouse, found his way across Europe and eventually made it all the way to Chicago, where he was reunited with his family. That little boy would become my maternal grandfather, James J. Kagan, known affectionately as "Grandpa Doc."

Like millions of turn-of-the-century immigrants, Grandpa Doc arrived not knowing a word of English. Through a lot of hard work and determination, Grandpa learned to speak totally unaccented, Midwestern-flat English, and got himself a job with Sears Roebuck & Company. He stayed with Sears until after the Crash of '29 [in which he lost a fortune], then decided to go to school. In 1939 -- at age 48 -- he became a Podiatrist. He wound up working at his new profession for nearly 30 years, then retired with Grandma Anne to California, where he shed his coat and tie, grew a goatee, and enjoyed the sunshine. A quiet unassuming man who will always be remembered for saying "You know, that reminds me of a story," Grandpa was the American Dream of Success.

Although Doc has been gone for more than 30 years, I find myself thinking about him quite a bit these days. I'm sure our protracted debate over the future of American immigration policy has a lot of people remembering and

thinking about their parents, grandparents, cousins, spouses -- all those who came to this country carrying little more than hopes and dreams.

The history of American immigration policy is a rather checkered one. Back in the antebellum era, congressional nativists constructed legislative walls in order to keep the Irish from entering the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. During the "Gay Nineties," laws we enacted laws to keep the "anarchists of the east" from our shores. After World War I, Congress passed the notorious Johnson Immigration Act. This law, which was a naked attempt to keep Italians, Poles, Serbs and Slaves from coming to the United States, actually limited the absolute number of people entering from a particular country to 2% of that nationality residing in the United States according to the 1890 census! During the rancorous debate that pitted isolationists and nativists against internationalists, poet Stephen Vincent Benet wrote: *"Remember that when you say: 'I will have none of this exile and this stranger, for his face is not like my face and his speech is strange,' you have denied America with that word."*

Congress didn't get around to atoning for the sinful Johnson Act until 1965 . . .

Today, the debate is over those we call illegal aliens. By anyone's best estimate, there are a minimum of 10 million of them residing in the United States. Many don't speak English; many pay no taxes; many are employed as maids, gardeners, piece workers and farm laborers. To listen to the debate, one would think that these illegals are stealing our jobs, flooding our prisons and impoverishing our nation. That they represent a conspiracy to undermine the very country to which they have fled.

Diagnosis of the ailment are plenty; prescriptions for its cure are scant:

- "We ought to send them back where they came from."
- "Let's build our own 'Great Wall of China' to keep 'em out."
- "Let's offer those who've been here . . . years amnesty."
- Etc., etc., etc.

I must admit that I don't have any solution to the problem. I do know, however, that modern problems, modern situations, require modern resolutions and modern, out-of-the-box thinking. There are some glaring differences between the immigrants of yesteryear and those over whom we are waging debates today. To begin with, those who immigrated to America back in Grandpa Doc's time, essentially lost touch with "the old world." There were no direct flights, no means of instant communication, rarely a hope -- let alone a desire or prayer -- of being in touch with what was often a difficult, even harrowing past. And while many immigrants did tend to seek out those who shared the same language, culture and cuisine, they essentially set about the task of becoming part of the great American salad bowl -- of becoming citizens.

It goes without saying that we do have a major problem today. Our porous borders and lax oversight have made slipping undetected into this country far from difficult. And even with all the tough talk, people are still risking everything to get here. To people the world over, the United States represents hope, freedom and a future.

Jack Paar once quipped that "immigration is the sincerest form of flattery." There is a great deal of truth underlying his *bon mot*. What these illegals seek -- what they sense of American greatness -- is oftentimes lost on those of us who were born and raised here. We take so much for granted. The average American knows little of our history, tends to sit out elections, and can more readily identify Bevis and Butthead than the three branches of the federal government. Few native-born Americans speak a second language, and most think that all they have to do to make themselves understood is to speak LOUDLY AND SLOWLY.

Before we start constructing Fortress America and making plans to send 10 million illegals packing, we might do well to remember that at base, we are all immigrants. We face a peculiarly American challenge in dealing with all our illegals. I just hope and pray that we will eventually find a solution that will be



both just and equitable, a solution that will not embarrass that lady with the lamp who enthralled Grandpa Doc more than a century ago

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June 22, 2006 in The American Scene . . . | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

June 29, 2006

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## A Box of Rocks?

If the old saw "people tend to get the government they deserve" is true, I guess it means that we, the American people, are dumber than a box of rocks. How else to explain the current clique of clueless, Kleptocrats who have held our nation in thrall these past six years -- twelve if you go back to the Gingrich-led takeover of Congress in 1994? Have we, the people, lost our minds? Are a majority of us so detached, so easily mollified by so-called "Compassionate Conservatism" that we are even considering keeping the government in their hands for another two, four or even eight years? The very thought should make any but the most hardened elitist political troglodyte shudder in fear.

The sins, the very brazenness of the current cabal is not without historic precedent. This is the good news. The bad -- nay, the horrific -- news is that the administration whose pattern comes closest to mirroring that of the Bushies is Warren Gamaliel Harding's -- unquestionably the worst, most corrupt administration in American history. Similarities abound. Like Bush, Harding larded his cabinet with cronies from the world of big business. Like Bush, Harding had a "brain" [Attorney General Harry M. Dougherty] who choreographed his every political step. Like Bush, Harding entered office knowing next to nothing about economics, foreign or domestic policy. And like Bush, Harding had an absolutely tin ear when it came to the dreams, needs or aspirations of the middle and working class. Unlike Bush, Harding *did* do far more than any other president before or since to preserve and protect the Constitution; he ordered the moldering document removed from the dusty files of the National Archives and placed under protective glass.

Despite the fact that the Harding-era Congress was peopled by such giants as Senators Hiram Johnson, William Borah, George Norris and Robert La Follete and Representatives Alban Barkley, Carl Vinson and Nicholas Longworth, it did little more than cut taxes, promote Prohibition, and restrict immigration. Sound familiar? One thing they did not do -- unlike the current crop on Capitol Hill -- was waste time debating such "critical" issues as the Flag Burning Amendment, English as America's official language, or whether marriage ought to be defined as the union between a man and a woman. Even the Harding/Gillette/Cabot Lodge Congress -- despite its many, many shortcomings and elitist attitude -- showed far more respect for the both institution and the American people than the firm of Bush, Hastert and Frist. Say what you will about Harding and his cronies; they rarely tried to insult the intelligence of the American public.

The Bush government, on the other hand, long ago concluded that a majority of the American people were either politically disinterested, disaffected or just plain brain-dead. How else to explain their naked, meretricious grab for power? For far too long, the American public has been politically somnolent, blithely accepting such Orwellian untruths as:

- Toppling Saddam protects San Francisco;
- Turning a multi-trillion dollar surplus into a multi-trillion dollar deficit is good for the economy;
- Global warming is an unsubstantiated opinion;
- Mulcting the middle class is moral;
- Refusing to raise the minimum wage while voting oneself a pay-raise is perfectly correct.
- Shredding constitutional safeguards is an ideal way of preserving constitutional rights.

In Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister*, detective Phillip Marlowe makes reference to "that class of people that can convince themselves that everything

they do is right." Although Marlowe was referring to Orfamay and Orrin Quest -- moral albinos both -- he could easily have been referring to the entire crop of self-righteous born-again neocons that extend from Bush, Cheney and Rove to the likes of such cheerleaders as O'Reilly, Limbaugh, and Coulter. Like the Quests, the neocons can justify virtually anything they do in the name of some expedient -- whether it be called "national security," "good old fashioned American values," or "defending American liberty." It all boils down to the same thing: "trust me . . . I know what I'm doing." What all this adds up to is an administration, a Congress -- and now a Court -- that is robbing America blind.

Let's open the window for a moment and let an optimistic breeze enter. There are some emerging signs that perhaps -- just perhaps -- we are beginning to listen with both ears and not liking what we hear, and beginning to look with both eyes and seeing that some things aren't quite so black-and-white as they've been portrayed. We are hearing things that make little sense, and seeing things that are inconsistent:

- Why is it perfectly cricket for the Executive Branch to leak the name of a clandestine CIA operative, but treasonous for the *New York Times* to disclose that the Bush Administration has been secretly tracking millions and millions of international bank transactions?
- How is it possible for a president who has sworn to uphold the law to then unilaterally decide that he can obviate or ignore legislation passed by his own Congress?
- Isn't it incredibly inconsistent that a president, who misses no opportunity to express his overwhelming support for "our brave young men and women who are in harm's way," has yet to go to visit a single wounded soldier at Walter Reed, and, has even cut the V.A. budget?
- That two of America's biggest moral cheerleaders -- Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh -- are, respectively, the author of a pornographic novel who has been publicly charged with sexual harassment, and a pill popper

with a history of obtaining his medicaments illegally. [By the way, so far as I know, Viagra is only used for one purpose. And considering that Rush isn't married, that would have to mean that he is having sex outside the bounds of holy matrimony. Oops!]

A very bright fellow once told me that as far as he was concerned, "the biggest, nastiest sin of all is considering me to be a fool." I agree with him. Wholeheartedly. Those in power have been treating a majority of the American people as if they/we are cretins for too long. But there is hope. America eventually replaced the vapidness of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover with the progressivism of the New Deal. This November, I hope and pray that the American voting public will take all those rocks out of the box, replace them with brains, and do what is necessary to restore a government that we truly deserve.

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# the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

July 05, 2006

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## Constitutional Dreaming

'Tis truly a pity how far we, the people, have strayed from the true meaning of our various national days of celebration. Washington's and Lincoln's birthday -- previously two separate commemorations -- have coalesced into a single "Presidents' Day. We are far more likely to see Honest Abe and the Aristocrat of Mt. Vernon acting as pitchmen for one-day sales than read such immortal pieces as "The Gettysburg Address" or "Washington's Farewell to the Troops." Thanksgiving? Well, that's a day to gather around a table, eat everything in sight, and watch some NFL team demolish the Detroit Lions. And seldom is heard an appreciative word, and the guys are quite rowdy all day.

What about the Fourth of July? Well, for most, it means hotdogs, beer, loads of baseball and fireworks, fireworks, fireworks. To my way of thinking, commemorating the birth of a nation by recreating war [the fireworks are "the bombs bursting in air"] is pretty damn strange. I rather prefer the Israeli custom: on their Independence Day, people run around with plastic squeak hammers, water pistols and whistles, and generally have a frivolous blast -- not a nuance of war to be found. Then again, for the Israelis, war, violence and bloodshed are a fact of everyday life, not some vague national recollection.

As an historian of the American political scene, I spend my 4th a bit differently. Beginning on the first of July, and extending throughout the entire month, I read [or in some cases reread] such historic documents as the

Constitution, the *Federalist Papers*, and the remarkable journals of James Madison and William Maclay [the latter, a curmudgeonly an Anti-Federalist senator from Pennsylvania]. This year, added to the mix, I reread Page Smith's extraordinary tome, "The Shaping of America: A People's History of the Young Republic." Smith [1917-1995], one of my mentors at the University of California, was so in sync with the minds, hearts and *kishkes* of the Founding Fathers that we, his students, often believed he must have been with them in Philadelphia. Professor Smith was wont to quote Tacitus, the classical Roman historian: "History must be told because unless we keep our past accessible, we will have great difficulty in creating any decent and humane future . . . every new event is a fresh revelation of the past." Boy oh boy, did Tacitus and Smith ever know what they were talking about!

Rereading and pondering anew the documents, accounts and descriptions of our nation's earliest days gives one pause. It's nothing short of miraculous that the country ever came into being. Its creation was -- and is -- the single greatest feat of intellectual and oratorical brilliance the world has ever seen. That out of a relatively tiny population such men as Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Paine, Franklin, Madison, Morris, Jay, Hamilton, Randolph and the rest should be living conterminously, is nothing short of a miracle. That they -- despite differences in political philosophy, personal temperament and sectional proclivities could hammer out -- let alone get ratified -- the Constitution, is the stuff of which epic literature is written.

It never ceases to amaze me just how close the United States came to breaking apart into warring factions at the very moment of its birth. The two opposing camps broke down along "Federalist" and Anti-Federalist" lines -- meaning, roughly, between those who favored a strong central Federal government and those who believed that all power resided in the states. Indeed, the Anti-Federalists wanted to begin with the words "We the States," rather than "We the People."

These were men of vast intellect, great erudition, huge egos and, in most cases, aristocratic bearing. They represented two strains of human thought that have both shaped and haunted America for more than 230 years. Professor Smith referred to these strains as "Classical-Christian Consciousness" and "Secular-Democratic Consciousness." The former, as its name implies, derives its *weltanschauung* from Christianity. It sees man as inherently sinful, and in need of strong, centralized moral leadership. The latter, which draws its strength from both the Reformation and the Enlightenment, views man as essentially flawed, but through the power of reason, capable of making enormous progress. This dichotomy -- Professor Smith called it "America's political schizophrenia" -- existed at the beginning; it continues to this very day. Can you say "Christian Conservative versus Liberal Democrat?"

The Founders recognized that there were, at root, three basic forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy -- that is, the rule of the one, the few and the many. The deliberations at the Constitutional convention were captious to the max. Each form -- monarchy, aristocracy and democracy had its strong, vocal adherents. The level of argumentation and vituperation was such, that at any moment, the delegates to the convention might have walked away in disgust and formed a bunch of small countries. But no, somehow they managed to get together on a system that paid obeisance to all three. That is why we have a President [monarchy], a Senate [aristocracy] and a House of Representatives [democracy]. It was a system that none thought perfect, but in the end, most agreed they could live with.

Unbelievably, a shift of only 31 votes among the 13 colonies would have sent the Constitution -- and the United States of America -- onto the scrapheap of historic misadventures. Just as is the case today, the lobbying effort back then was intense. As Maclay wrote at the time, "one land speculator with a single dinner for pliant legislators would procure ten votes." Several of the Southern colonies -- fearing that a strong central government would mean the abolition of slavery -- were convinced to vote for ratification on the promise that the



first issue the new Congress would take up would be a Bill of Rights. The Southern colonies voted "aye," but were lied to: the first issues taken up by Congress involved taxation [the new nation was roughly \$75 million in debt], the placement of a national capital, and -- what else? -- setting the rate of Congressional pay. It was only during Congress' third session that they got around to the promised Bill of Rights. What is largely forgotten, is that the House agreed on sixteen amendments, which the Senate cut to fourteen, which a House-Senate Committee further reduced to twelve, and then to ten. They fought like cats and dogs for each and every comma, but somehow it all worked out, this great experiment.

And it is still an experiment; one that much of the rest of the world has dabbled with from time to time. And even though it seems at times that a disconcertingly large number of peoples of the world are more attracted to our movies, video games and tee-shirts than to the benefits of democracy, the dream, the experiment persists . . . and spreads.

Maybe next year, we'll read a few more documents, eat a few less hotdogs, and come away with a proper measure of awe. For that's what the Fourth of July is supposed to engender . . . awe.

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

July 13, 2006

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## The Amazing Sol Bloom

*From time to time, I'm going to be running one of the biographic essays from my upcoming book, The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill. The first in the series is about one of my favorites, the late Representative Sol Bloom, who served in Congress in from the 1920s to the late 1940s. Perhaps it will intrigue you enough to want to buy the book when its published in early 2008 by the Scarecrow Press. Enjoy!*

By any stretch of the imagination, Sol Bloom must be considered one of the most colorful and unlikely people to ever have served in the United States Congress. An entrepreneur and impresario of great note, he had at least three highly successful careers before entering Congress at the age of fifty-three, where he remained for more than a quarter century, capping off his career by becoming chair of the House Committee on Foreign Relations.

Born in Pekin, Illinois, on March 9, 1870, Sol Bloom was the sixth and youngest child of Gershom and Sarah Bloom, Orthodox Jews who had immigrated to America from Poland in about 1860. Gershom, also known as Garrison, was an itinerant peddler. Although intelligent and industrious, he could never earn enough to feed his large family. In 1875, his small clothing store having gone bankrupt, Gershom packed the family onto a train and headed west to San Francisco. More than seventy years later, Sol Bloom would recall that train trip: how the family subsisted on eggs and fruit they purchased from Indians at the various railroad stops because they couldn't obtain kosher food.

Sol Bloom's formal education lasted precisely one day; his family could not afford to purchase the requisite texts for their son (a common practice in those days), and were too proud to ask for assistance. Therefore, at age seven, Sol found himself working in a brush factory. By age ten he was keeping the factory's books. At night, he sold programs at local theaters, acted in

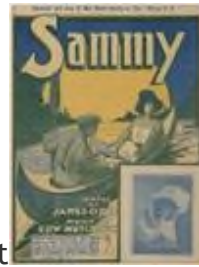


occasional bit parts, and became involved in a series of schemes he would later term "legitimate chiseling." As a younger, he became friends with the equally young David Belasco [see photo] , who would go on to become one of America's premier theater producers. They remained lifelong friends.

At age fifteen, Bloom was hired by San Francisco newspaper publisher H.H. de Young to be assistant treasurer of the Alcazar Theater. Over the next four years he sold advertising, got into merchandising and production, and by age nineteen, had amassed a fortune of more than \$80,000. At this point, he "retired" and took the grand tour of Europe. While there, he became fascinated by a troupe of Algerian sword swallowers, glass and scorpion eaters, and signed them to a personal contract. Upon his return to the United States, he was hired by his old mentor, de Young, to run the Midway Plaisance at the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago. For this he was paid the princely sum of \$50,000. During the Exposition, Bloom introduced America to the Ferris Wheel and the exotic dancer Little Egypt, for whom he wrote the famous "Hootchy Kootchy" tune. The song took the country by storm and made young Sol Bloom an even wealthier man.

When the Exposition closed, Bloom remained in Chicago and opened up the country's first mail-order music store. He renamed himself "Sol Bloom, the Music Man." Between 1896 and 1903, he built a chain of eighty music stores from coast-to-coast. By 1903, he was a millionaire.

In Chicago, Bloom was introduced to Evelyn Hechheimer, an aspiring songwriter from San Francisco. The two fell in love and were married. Sol's only concern was how she would be received into his family: the Blooms were Orthodox Jews; Evelyn and her family belonged to San Francisco's Temple Emanu-el, a classical Reform synagogue. Despite their "religious differences,"



they were married on June 22, 1897. At the reception following, they were serenaded by two of Bloom's better-known songwriter clients: Paul Dresser, who sang "On the Banks of the Wabash," and Charles K. Harris, who crooned "After the Ball is Over: -- both published by Sol Bloom. The Blooms had one child, a daughter named Vera.

A genius at self-promotion, Sol Bloom managed to take out the first copyright of the twentieth century, a song called "I Wish I Was in Dixie Tonight." He managed this minor coup by sending agents to stand in line at the copyright office starting on December 29, 1899, and remained there until the office opened for business on January 2, 1900.

Moving on to New York in 1903, Bloom became national distributor for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Always restless, he also became a theater builder and a backer of stage productions. Over the course of less than ten years, he either built or renovated more than a dozen theaters along Broadway's "Great White Way." Among the theaters he built were the Apollo and the Harris. Bloom's partners in these ventures were Asa Candler, the founder of Coca-Cola, Edgar Selwyn, a movie pioneer, and Ed Bowes, one day to become famous as radio's "Major" Bowes. As a theater angel, Bloom backed the early works of playwright Elmer Reizenstein (Rice) and the then unknown John Galsworthy.

Moving into real estate, Bloom became a speculator and builder of apartment houses. When he learned that the Pennsylvania Railroad was going to bore a Hudson River tunnel in order to carry passengers into the heart of New York City, he took an option on all the land between 31st and 33rd Streets west of Seventh Avenue. He then made yet another fortune by selling the land that was to become Penn Station. Bloom always considered this to be his shrewdest real estate investment.

Sol Bloom got out of the music business in 1910, and by 1920, at age fifty, was ready to "retire" once again. The retirement proved to be short-lived. In



the off-year elections of 1922, Democrat Samuel Marx was elected to Congress from New York's Nineteenth District, but died before taking office. A special election ensued, in which Tammany Hall convinced Bloom to throw his hat into the ring. Bloom had no illusions about why the boys from Tammany had selected him: "I had been chosen to run because I was an amiable and solvent Jew." The Nineteenth District, one of America's wealthiest, soon became Bloom's. He would serve in Congress until his death in 1949.

Bloom's first decade-and-a-half in Congress was largely undistinguished, and his colleagues looked upon him as a bit of a buffoon. He spoke out against radio advertising, fought Sunday "Blue Laws," advocated putting baseball under federal control, and railed against the tax on boxing match admissions. In the late 1920s, he became interested in the so-called "Eastman Plan" for reforming the calendar, a brief craze that soon went out of fashion.

In 1926, Henry Ford published a series of anti-Semitic articles in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, under the collective title "The International Jew." The articles purported to show that Jews were "in direct control of all financial centers of government." Incensed by Ford's malicious

and scurrilous charges, Representative Bloom introduced a resolution in the House calling for a committee to be appointed that would inquire into their truth or falsity. Threatened with a subpoena and plagued by numerous court battles, Ford issued a public apology and finally shut down his anti-Semitic paper. Bloom believed that he had been largely responsible for putting Ford's noxious tirade to an end.

Sol Bloom's first taste of national exposure came when he was appointed director of the George Washington Bicentennial Commission in 1932. Given a budget of \$350,000 and a staff of 125, Bloom produced and directed a year-long gala that put the name, face, and ideals of America's first President



on every school bulletin board -- as well as in newspapers and movie theaters, and on radio. Much to everyone's surprise, Bloom turned a million-dollar profit for the government. So closely tied did he become with the Father of our Country, that for years to come, the New York Democrat received mail from schoolchildren addressed simply to "George Washington." Bloom also headed the Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission and published a brief book entitled *The Story of the Constitution*, which was provided free of charge to every schoolchild in America.

Through attrition and seniority, Sol Bloom became chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1939. This caused a shudder on Capitol Hill, because most cognoscenti believed that Bloom was incapable of anything but theatrics. In his first year as committee head, Bloom led the unsuccessful fight for President Roosevelt's revision of the Neutrality Act, but gained the respect of his colleagues in the process. After the beginning of World War II, Bloom successfully pushed through both Lend-Lease and the Selective Service Act. His role in reintroducing a military draft earned him the undying enmity of

American isolationists, who picketed his home even as Bloom was sitting *shiva* for his wife. He was vilified in the press as a "Jewish warmonger," and received enough threats on his life that J. Edgar Hoover assigned him a personal retinue of bodyguards.

Bloom was the only Jew selected for the eight-man American delegation that went to San Francisco in April, 1945, to write the United Nations Charter. At the sessions of the nascent world body, Bloom, viewed by more than one prominent historian as a "perennial court Jew," argued vociferously on behalf of refugees. It was too little, too late. IN 1943, Bloom had been the sole Jew on the American delegation to the Bermuda Conference, convened to discuss the single issue of wartime immigration. No aid was forthcoming for the Jews of Europe; Bloom's presence on the delegation was mere window dressing. Additionally, during the innumerable congressional battles over increased immigration quotas, Sol Bloom, House Foreign Relations Committee chair, did virtually nothing to help the Jews of Europe to escape Hitler's ovens. It was Bloom, acting at the behest of the State Department, who buried a 1943 House resolution to create a U.S. Government agency to rescue Jews from Hitler. But the agency -- the War Refugee Board -- was established anyway, when Jewish protests forced FDR's hand despite the non-action of Bloom's Congressional committee. One wonders how in the world Congress could again and again have barred increases in the number of European refugees allowed into America, especially when the three committees most directly responsible for this type of legislation (Foreign Relations, Immigration, and Judiciary) were chaired by Jews: Bloom, Samuel Dickstein and Emanuel Celler.

Throughout his long Congressional career, Bloom was both an ardent liberal and a vociferous supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal. Despite his vast wealth and opulent lifestyle, Bloom could always be counted on to vote for the interests of the downtrodden and the have-nots -- with the bothersome exception of the Jews of Europe.

Short and thin with slick black hair, Bloom was known for his impeccably tailored clothing, his omnipresent walking stick and the gold pince-nez attached with a flowing black ribbon. One of the most notable characters on Capitol Hill, Bloom used to walk up the steps of the Capitol each morning "strewing pennies, nickels and dimes along his path like Hansel and Gretel had done with crumbs in the fairy tale." After repeatedly observing this, House Doorkeeper "Fishbait" Miller asked him what he was doing. "He said, 'Shhhh;. Let the little children find them when they come to see the Capitol. In this Depression, someone has to show them that good things can happen.'" Till the end of his days, Bloom called himself an Orthodox Jew, observed the Sabbath as a day of total rest, and was easily able to converse in Yiddish. He served as honorary president of the Hebrew Convalescent Home in the Bronx, and was a life member of the West Side Institutional Synagogue. From all indications, he kept a kosher home until the last day of his life. Sol and Evelyn's daughter, Vera Tova, became an author, a prominent Washington hostess, and a songwriter of some note. She never married.

Sol Bloom succumbed to a heart attack in Washington on March 7, 1949, just two days shy of his seventy-ninth birthday. His seat in Congress was taken by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. He is buried in Mount Eden Cemetery, Pleasantville, New York.

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July 13, 2006 in Biography | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

July 21, 2006

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## The Luddite of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

With a swipe of the presidential veto pen [the one that Karl Rove miraculously located in his boss's deep freeze], George W. Bush has single-handedly resurrected the all-but-forgotten term *luddite*. For the uninitiated, the *Luddites* were an early-19th century British movement that expressed their total disdain for -- and absolute fear of -- modern technology, by going about destroying textile machines. Simply speaking, they saw these machines -- which were for them as inexplicable to them as the Internet is for some of us today -- as the work of the Devil. Starting out in 1811, the *Luddites* -- named after the likely mythical Ned Ludd -- wrecked vengeance against the forces and machinery of modernity. Their campaign reached its violent apogee -- or nadir, if you prefer -- in 1813, when the British Government held mass trials resulting in numerous death sentences and scores of "transportations" to penal colonies. Ever since, the term *luddite* has been used to describe those opposed to technological progress and its attendant social changes.

History shows that the *luddites'* presentments were more than likely real -- if totally misguided; they had a pathological hatred of technological progress. George W. Bush's veto of the bill that would have expanded federally funded embryonic stem cell research, on the other hand, is hopefully a pathology of a totally different stripe. Why "hopefully?" Because if we are to take the president and his neocon minions at their word, their fear lay not in the temporal, but rather than the spiritual, realm. In other words, if what the Bushies claim is true, their only problem is with the morality of destroying embryos, and not the potential miracles that future science might produce.

But wait. There are at least two glaring problems here: disingenuousness and transparency.

The first problem is the Bush/neocon concept of life. In his veto address, the president, standing amidst smiling parents and the photogenic little ones who started out as frozen embryos, proclaimed that he could not, in all good conscience, commit federal dollars to any program that would destroy human life. By this, we are to assume that the president believes that life begins at the moment of conception. I for one do not agree, but then again, I come from a different religious perspective. [In Jewish religious understanding, an embryo -- let alone a fetus -- is not considered *bar kayama* -- a supportable life form.] OK, reasonable people have the right to reasonably disagree. I have no problem with the president's [or his religiopolitical allies'] point of view. If they want to believe that life begins at conception, *mazal tov*.

Where I do find fault, is their lack of consistency -- their disingenuousness. As my friend Barney Frank of Massachusetts once asked a Republican colleague: "If life begins at conception, does it end at birth?" By this, the feisty congressman with the rapier-like wit meant point out that the majority of those who vote against abortion, birth control counseling and the like, are just as likely to vote against aid to education, Head Start, Food Stamps, and a thousand other programs that would also tend to show a reverence for human life. In other words, if every life is equally precious -- beginning at the precise moment of fertilization -- wouldn't it be both morally and politically consistent to support all those things that uplift and expand human potential? The Republicans' answer to Barney's question seems to be "Well . . . but . . . ah . . . "

Then, there is the second issue: that is transparency. It is becoming increasingly clear that a majority of the American public is finally on to Bush and the neocons; that we are beginning to finally get it. Issues like stem cell research funding, the Defense of Marriage Act, constitutional amendments on flag burning and keeping the words "in God we trust" in the Pledge of

Allegiance . . . all these are a blatant and transparent effort for the Republicans to shore up their support on the political right. God knows [yes, yes, God *does* know everything!] that Bush, Cheney, Rove, *et al* are suffering from serious political fallout these days. In poll after poll, Jill and Joe Average are finding fault with the Bush Administration's handling of foreign affairs, global warming, the deficit, the War on Terror . . . you name it. People who normally have about as much political sophistication and discernment as Archie Bunker are seeing gaping chinks in the Republican armor.

This is by no means meant to disparage the president's moral scruples. I will take him at his word that he believes with a full heart that life begins at conception, and that marriage means one man and one woman. Nonetheless, it is hard -- terribly hard -- to believe that in all this moral posturing, in all this overt pietism, this he and his handlers aren't out there taking the political polling pulse on a minute-by-minute basis. To make morality the subservient handmaiden to politics is about as immoral and cynical an act as one can imagine. It is tantamount, in rabbinic parlance, to putting a stumbling block in front of a blind man -- a first-class no-no.

Then again, perhaps George W. is really a Luddite -- a man who wishes to turn back the clock to a time when the rich got richer and the rest of us knew our place.

'Ya think?

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July 21, 2006 in Politics | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

July 27, 2006

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## One Hundred Days and Counting

According to Ben Franklin, there are precisely two certainties in this world of ours: death and taxes. It seems to me that were the "great American overachiever" alive, well and doing his thing in 2006, he might well consider a couple of additional items for his list of perennials . . . like the Cubs playing before packed houses at Wrigley Field, the rich getting richer, and the next election being called "the most critical in all American history." About the last, there can be no doubt. I mean when was the last [or indeed, the first] time anyone heard a political pundit proclaim "well, I don't really think the next mid-term election is going to amount to a hill of beans!" Indeed, it seems that every two or four years, our elections are likened to the titanic, monumental struggles betwixt David and Goliath, Hector and Achilles, Wellington and Bonaparte. Each succeeding election, we are instructed, is really a battle for something called "the soul of America." Well dear reader, the next engagement on the great battlefield of American politics is only 100 days away. And you know something? This election may well be the most crucial we've faced in a long, long time.

Back in 1966, folk rocker Stephen Stills penned the anthem "For What It's Worth," containing the haunting lyric "There's battle lines being drawn. Nobody's right if everybody's wrong." To stop, look and listen to Democrat and Republican mouthpieces, that would seem to just about sum things up.

To Republicans, Democrats seem to be nothing more than a cult of spineless secularists without an original thought or program in their collective head; a

mass of ultra-liberal ectoplasm that stands foursquarely against American security, American values and the American Way of Life. "Put the Democrats back in control," Republicans warn, "and soon America will be under-siege, over-taxed, and around the moral bend." To listen to Republican mouthpieces, one might imagine that Democrats aren't children born of human mothers and fathers, but rather, malevolent beings sprung to life from the blood of the headless Medusa. Democrats are often stereotyped as having the morals of Bill Clinton, the demeanor of Howard Dean, and the dry, self-righteous mien of Al Gore.

Often times Democrats are just as puerile and absolutist in their characterization and condemnation of Republicans. To many Democrats, Republicans are nothing more than a clique of bloated, self-centered oligarchs who speak like pietists but act like piranhas. Republicans are charged with being bigoted, narrow-minded, rapacious reactionaries who care far more about profit and loss in the next quarter, than the viability of planet earth in the next century. To Democrats, Republicans are all named Bush, DeLay and Abramoff.

Sounds like what's coming up in 100 days isn't so much an election between Democrats and Republicans for control of the Congress, but a holy war between the forces of light against the forces of darkness. The only question is, who represents the light and who the darkness? When two sides of a political tiff spend more time deriding and demeaning than explaining and elevating, elections become far, far less than we would want, but just about what we deserve. I ask you: is this anyway to run a democracy?

It seems to me that real political democracy is only possible when one is willing to act as though one's opponents have hold of some important portion of the truth, however much in our hearts we doubt it. This is the beginning of political civility; something all but missing from our current system. Furthermore, when we become determined [as, I am sorry to say, many national Republicans have] to combine our conviction of the absolute truth of

our own ideas and the rectitude of our motives with overt political action, we have launched ourselves on the path of the dictator and tyrant.

Believe it or not, there *are* significant issues and situations that should be addressed in the coming election. Consider that we are mired in a hopeless war/insurgency in Iraq; that Jews and Moslems are killing each other and no one has any idea of how to get them to stop; that America, though hopelessly in debt continues to cut taxes; that the government is listening in on telephone conversations and could care less what the law has to say about it; that temperatures are rising, earning power is shrinking, money continues to flow unabated into political coffers, and no one knows what to do about millions upon millions of illegal immigrants.

And yet, to the proverbial Martian, all that seems to matter to the American people is whether our Pledge of Allegiance contains the words "under God," our flags are protected from burning, and our embryos are safe from the clutches of medical science. Somehow though, I don't think even a Martian would be fooled.

A few nights ago on CSPAN, four Democrat members of Congress, led by Florida Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz [the others being Kendrick Meek of Florida, Tim Ryan of Ohio, and William Delahunt of Massachusetts] took to the floor of the House and delivered an hour-long "101 course" on the problems and challenges facing America. Their presentation was, to put it mildly, a tour-de-force. The only problem was that they had virtually the entire chamber to themselves; not a Republican was stirring. As I watched, listened and learned, I found myself wishing that every American voter, indeed, every member of that august body [The House of Representatives] had been there; that the American public had been glued to their TV sets, and the various Representatives chained to their antique desks. For what these young political upstarts were doing was something utterly unique: making sense. Not only did they attack the various problems; they even offered recommendations on how to solve them. Now there's a revolutionary thought!

Unless and until we stop demonizing those with whom we disagree, no progress can be expected. No party has a corner on the market of divine inspiration. Republicans and Democrats are mere mortals, not gods from on high.

Justice Louis D. Brandeis once wrote that "the highest office is that of private citizen." That thought should stay with us during the coming 100 days, for we, the people, will have the final say.

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

August 03, 2006

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## In Tequila Veritas . . .

**Question:** what three things do Joel Silver, Rob Cohen, Eric Lerner, Keith Rubinstein, Jeremy Kagan, Daniel Melnick and Allen Shapiro have in common?

**Answer:** (1) All eight are Jewish; (2) All eight have at one time produced Mel Gibson movies; (3) None has uttered a solitary peep about Gibson's recent dipsomaniacal, profanity-laced malediction against the Jews.

**Question:** Who said the following?

*"[Former FED Chair] Alan Greenspan tells us what to do. Someone should take him out and hang him."*

*"They claimed that there were 6.2 million [Jews] in Poland before the war, and they claimed after the war there were 200,000 -- therefore [Hitler] must have killed 6 million of them. They simply got up and left! They were all over the Bronx and Brooklyn and Sidney, Australia, and Los Angeles."*

*"The Jew is still actively anti-Christian. He is, for by being a Jew, he is anti-everyone else."*

**Answer:** Hutton Gibson, Mel's 86-year old father. Hauntingly, when asked to comment on these and other outrageous statements his father has made, the actor responded, "my dad has never lied to me."

By now, there isn't a man, woman or child from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe who doesn't know what happened out on California's Pacific Coast Highway a few nights ago; of how the obviously inebriated Gibson was pulled over by the



CHP, went into an anti-Semitic rant, was taken to a local station where he proceeded to urinate on the floor, and almost tear a phone off the wall. Of how he went on and on about Jews being responsible for all the world's wars, of how he was going to do whatever it took to "f. . . over" all the cops who were responsible for stopping him, and of the initial white-washed, sanitized report issued by the authorities. As things stand now, Gibson has been charged with three minor offenses and at worst, could spend 6 months in country jail.

There are several aspects of this odious situation that leave me deeply troubled. To wit:

Mel Gibson

Hollywood

The public

**Mel Gibson:** Is there any sentient being who harbors doubts that Mel Gibson is a serious, world-class bigot, a man who is, in the words of writer Christopher Hitchens, "sick to his empty core with Jew-hatred"? Gibson is a devotee -- not to mention the major financial backer of -- a Catholic splinter group that rejects every Papal encyclical of the last two generations and, [again in Hitchens' words] "lives off the stench of medieval anti-Semitism." The American-born, Australian-raised actor has even gone so far as to proclaim that his wife Robyn, with whom he has seven children, is going to hell because she subscribes to the wrong Christian sect.

For a man who has spent the better part of the past quarter-century engaged in making motion pictures -- an industry historically suffused with Jewish men and women -- he sounds like the lead publicist for *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, history's most notorious and scurrilous anti-Semitic forgery. Gibson has, to date, admitted a "lifelong struggle" with alcohol, checked himself into rehab, and issued two separate apologies -- the first, a blanket *mea culpa* that failed to address his calumnies against the Jewish people -- many of whom have made him a multi-centamillionaire. And that brings us to

**Hollywood:** For more than ninety years, "Hollywood" -- the town of my birth -- has been synonymous with the American film industry. That industry was created largely by men unafraid to take significant financial risks; Jewish men named Goldwyn, Meyer, Selznick, Warner, Cohen, Zukor, Fox, Laemmle, who in turn hired other Jewish men named Thalberg, Lewen, Hymanson, Wyler, Wilder, Lubitsch, Shary, Schenck, Cukor, Mankiewicz and Hecht. Most were either upstairs in their executive offices or behind the cameras directing. A handful found themselves before the cameras as actors and actresses. But for this, they paid a price: Theodosia Goodman, Jacob Stein, Muni Weisenfreund, Sophia Cosow, Julius Garfinkle, Emanuel Goldenberg and Melvin Hesselberg became, respectively, Theda Bara, Ricardo Cortez, Paul Muni, Silvia Sidney, John Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, and Melvin Douglas.

Although long known as a hotbed of leftist politics, Hollywood, to paraphrase the late Dorothy Parker, "knows only one 'ism' -- plagiarism." During the studio era, when actors and writers were owned lock, stock and barrel by the moguls, one remained on the screen so long as their films made money. Hollywood has had no problem employing drunks [the Barrymores, Spencer Tracy, Humphrey Bogart], addicts [Mabel Normand, Jean Eagles, Robert Downey, Jr.], bigots [Adolphe Menjou, Ward Bond, Charles Coburn, and now Mel Gibson], and those with what might be termed "unique sexual track records" [Cary Grant, Errol Flynn, Kay Francis, Delores Del Rio]. What they all had in common, was that their films made money -- lots and lots of money. Those who for whatever public reasons found their careers come to stunning, crashing conclusions -- Clara Bow, Billy Haines and Roscoe Arbuckle, and director Michael Cimino come to mind -- were, generally speaking, already falling out of public favor at the time of their respective demise. In other words, the cash registers were already sounding rather tinny . . .

So how will Hollywood respond to the Mel Gibson situation? Will his career survive? If there were justice in the universe, the answer would be a resounding NO! However, Gibson is *sui generis*; an actor who is so rich that he

no longer needs a studio in order to make a film. And despite the fact that many of the major Hollywood studios are still headed up by Jewish people -- DreamWorks' Katzenberg and Spielberg, Warners' Barry Meyer, Universal's Ron Meyer], hardly a peep has been heard. Even Oren Aviv [*Oren Aviv* for crying out loud!] the new head of Disney, is prepared to "forgive and forget" Gibson's trespasses. How could this possibly be? How and why would a man named Aviv [Hebrew for "spring"], overlook the Holocaust-denying bilge of a bigot like Gibson? In two words, B-O-X O-F-F-I-C-E. Aviv, like every other production chief can read a profit-and-loss statement; knows that Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* pulled in over \$600 million bucks, and that he's represented by Ed Limato, one of the most powerful agents in town.

"Studio executives are clearly not the bravest people in the world," says Howard Rosenman, producer of "The Family Man" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." "They're all thinking, what happens if he comes out of this and I've said something? He won't work with me when I need him." So much for principles. Well, if the Hollywood moguls are going to act like spineless jellyfish, what about the rest of us?

**The Public:** In early polls, it would seem that a rather large majority of the movie-going public is not going to be put off from seeing future Mel Gibson flicks just because the actor/producer/director's words and deeds are beneath contempt. Forgiving and forgetting would seem to be on the minds of most. I guess H. L. Mencken was correct when he wrote, "no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public."

Does this mean that a majority of the American public condones anti-Semitic slurs or believes that Jews are the cause of all the world's ills? Probably not. What it does mean is that a great percentage of the public is horribly, terrifyingly shallow; willing to overlook and forgive in a major celebrity that for which they would shun a neighbor, politician or member of the clergy.

Many have suggested that Gibson should be forgiven for he was, after all, drunk on tequila, and therefore not responsible. I'm sorry, that just doesn't cut it. And although I know the verse about not visiting the sins of the father upon the children, I have to believe that Mel was telling the absolute truth when he declared that his father never lied to him.

Mel Gibson is fully deserving of our censure, disapprobation and revilement; through our words, our deeds and especially through our pocketbooks. I don't care how many statements of regret he proffers, nor how many dialogues he has with rabbis, cantors, *mohelim* or synagogue presidents. This isn't the case of a topical malady; it is completely systemic.

*In tequila veritas . . .*

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# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

August 10, 2006

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## Neville Chamberlain Lives

Back in the fall of 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, along with diplomats representing the major European powers, became a signatory to the infamous "Munich Agreement." By terms of this pact the major European powers gave the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia to Hitler's Third Reich. As soon as he signed the pact, Chamberlain scurried back to England where, facing the press and holding aloft a piece of paper, defended the pact and proudly proclaimed that the agreement represented nothing less than "Peace for our time." [For reasons unknown, history remembers Chamberlain's promise being "Peace *in* our time."] With those four words, Chamberlain sealed his fate forevermore; I doubt one person in a hundred million remembers Chamberlain for anything else.

Chamberlain was not the first -- nor certainly the last -- leader to make a fool of himself by misjudging and misunderstanding the current of events. Take President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice vis-à-vis the war between Israel and Hezbollah. Bush sees this horrendous conflict as "an opportunity;" Rice calls it "the birth pangs of a new Middle East." Ignoring the possible eschatological underpinnings of their statements, to call the present horror either "an opportunity" or a "birth pang" shows a monstrous, stunning lack of understanding -- of the past, the present and most frighteningly, the future.

Without question, the Bush Administration's staunch support for Israel is correct. The record is clear: Israel was provoked into this war by Hezbollah's

prolonged and protracted firing of Katyusha rockets into the country's northern sector, staging cross-border incursions, and kidnapping Israeli soldiers. Anyone who denies these facts is an ignorant fool. And anyone who says that Israel is in the wrong should ask them self how America would react if attacked similarly by, say, Mexico or Canada. So, the Bush Administration's support for Israel *is* both fitting and proper.

But that's about as far as things go. Bush and Company have likened the Israel/Hezbollah conflict to our war in Iraq: a sovereign nation striking back at those who attacked that nation. Close, but no cigar. No matter how they try to spin it, the simple fact is that Iraq did not attack America on 9/11; al Qaeda did. Al Qaeda was not then, and never has been in Iraq, the country we chose to invade as punishment. And from statements coming out of the White House and State Department, it would seem that they really haven't got a firm grasp of the situation. The one place where the analogy does hold water is in the nature of the combatants: on one side, a nation's military; on the other, an insurgency made up of people more than willing to die the martyr's death.

The Arab world sees Israel being America's surrogate. Let's forget for the moment that Hezbollah is the surrogate of Syria and Iran, and that "what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." The Israel-is-a-surrogate-of-America rant, coupled with America's refusal to deal with countries it does not like, leaves us diplomatically isolated. Even the so-called "moderate" Arab nations -- Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan -- have become totally estranged from US policy in the Middle East . . . whatever that policy is. And, we have totally lost credibility with the so-called "Arab Street." Bush is now calling for a cease-fire with a multi-national peacekeeping force being brought in to patrol the Israel-Lebanon border. Since when did he come to recognize the United Nations? Where has he been these past six years? The president seems to think that so long as we [whoever "we" are] can get the two sides to sit down and talk -- once Israel has inflicted the maximum amount of damage -- then things will eventually work out. Publicly, the Bush Administration supports the

Democracy of the ballot box. It just never dawned on them that voters in Iraq [or Lebanon or Palestine] might cast their votes for parties and people we just don't like -- like Hamas and Hezbollah.

What Bush and Company don't seem to grasp is that Hezbollah -- and its backers, Syria and Iran -- aren't terribly interested in keeping Israel from returning to Lebanon. They are totally devoted to the utter, complete destruction of the Jewish State. This is certainly nothing new; the first attack on Israel came in 1948, within hours of its having been proclaimed a state. How it is that 5 or so million Jews can pose such a dire threat to a billion Moslems is beyond my comprehension, but that's the way things are.

The obvious chess master in this bloody mess is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the man who proudly proclaims the Holocaust a myth. By supplying Hezbollah with arms, he has turned international attention away from resolution of its nuclear issue. Tell me: have you heard much about western resolve to get Iran to scrap its nuclear program? And, mind you, Lebanon isn't the only place where Irani surrogates are fighting. Creating a Shia state in the South of Iraq would also go a long way toward keeping the rest of the world's eyes and ears away from Irani intentions.

I fear that any change of heart -- or opening of mind -- that may occur within the Bush camp will be too little, too late. They have spent the past half-decade preferring their "Axis of Evil" rhetoric to reality, fighting an unconscionable, unwinnable war in Iraq and virtually ignoring most of the world. To get back into the diplomatic game now -- or any time in the near future -- will likely be greeted with gross skepticism. And for good reason.

So what to do? As Amos of old proclaimed, "I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet." Having admitted that, let me say that about the best we can hope for in the near future is that Israel destroy as much of Hezbollah as possible. This will not be easy. They are well armed, have no compunction about dying for "the cause," and have the world press on their side. This last matter is

critical; much of the world press seems to think that the only civilian casualties that matter occur in Lebanon. A recent pro-Israel editorial cartoon tells it all: a heavily-armed Hezbollah fighter is shooting at an equally heavily-armed Israeli. The Israeli is standing in front of a baby carriage; the Hezbollah insurgent is standing behind one.

The Hezbollah shock forces are merely fighting for the next world -- their 70 virgins. The Israeli soldier is fighting for the very existence of his or her country -- a much greater motivator.

Assuming that the IDF does deliver a stunning body blow to Hezbollah, thereby keeping them at bay, the next step will have to be electing a new American administration that sees partners -- and not enemies -- out there in the world. It will be a long, slow and laborious process to undo all the ill will that the Bushies have created, but, as we have been taught, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

If Neville Chamberlain has been alive and well in the Bush White House, perhaps the next occupant will take a page from Al Jolson, who's best remembered for saying "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet!"



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

August 17, 2006

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## "Qui Me Amat, Amat Et Canem Meam"

Way back in the summer of 1969, I went up to Capitol Hill, where I had landed a job on the staff of a young United States Senator. Upon my arrival, I was amazed to learn that the senator [who was barely 37 at the time], was the second-oldest person on staff. Upon reflection, that struck me as being just fine; remember, these were the days when "don't trust anyone over the age of thirty" was all the vogue among the younger set. As a staff of still wet-behind-the-ears political tyros, we were full of energy and ideas, not to mention full of ourselves and just plain full of it.

Back in those days, the senate itself was of historic giants as J. William Fulbright, Everett McKinley Dirksen, Mike Mansfield, and Jacob Javits, not to mention Sam Ervin, Claiborne Pell, and Albert Gore, Sr. It was also the home to such historic political mossbacks as John McClellan, Richard Russell, Allen Ellender, and John Stennis. To say that I -- already an American political history fanatic -- was in hog heaven, would be putting it mildly.

During the time the senate was considering the nomination of Federal Appeals Court Judge G. Harold Carswell to the United States Supreme Court, one senator -- Nebraska's Roman Hruska -- made one of the bonehead statements of all time. With Carswell being pilloried daily in the press for being, at best, a mediocre judge, Hruska decided to rise to the defense of not only the nominee, but of mediocre people everywhere: "So what if he is mediocre?" Hruska asked. "There are a lot of mediocre judges and people and

lawyers. They are entitled to a little representation, aren't they? We can't have all Brandeises, Cardozos and Frankfurters and stuff like that there."

When we, the young upstarts of Capitol Hill learned of Hruska's comment, we had a field day, declaring him to be an ogre, a jerk and an intellectual Lilliputian. While we were rapt up in our put-down session, our boss, the young senator happened back into our office "bullpen" -- that's where the coffee and ashtrays were. After listening to our jibes for a couple of moments, the senator chimed in, "That will be enough! Listen up boys and girls: just because you don't agree with a man's politics doesn't give you the right to denigrate him as a human being. Senator Hruska definitely made a stupid comment, for which he will no doubt pay. Senator Hruska and I are on the opposite side of most issues. Nonetheless, he's a very nice man. Hate his politics if you will, but respect the man." The senator then turned and left. We sat in stony chastened silence. Nonetheless, the senator had taught us an incredibly important lesson about politics and civility -- a lesson that we could all benefit from anew.

Tell me I'm wrong, but it strikes me that today, more than ever, there is a shocking lack of civility in our public discourse. Bipartisanship -- once the hallmark of all political progress -- is as much a relic as a \$15.00 tank of gas. To stand on the opposite side of an issue means not just holding a different opinion or outlook; it means seeing the opposition as nothing less than a pack of craven, avaricious hounds from hell. Criticizing George W. Bush [or his administration, or his policies] is, in conservative Republican circles, tantamount to being against God, the flag and all American history. By the same token, supporting Bush or his administration or his policies is, in Democratic circles, tantamount to being a selfish, robotic troglodyte. The mean-spiritedness that pervades American politics has reached epidemic proportions. Instead of airing issues and laying out agendas that deal with the challenges besetting America, our leaders, legislators and candidates attack each other with an *ad hominem* vigor that makes Don Rickles look like "Mr.

Nice." Is it any wonder that the electorate is turned off, and politicians rank just beneath root canal in public popularity?

Last week, I wrote a Blog article on the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, paying particular attention to how the Bush Administration fits [or doesn't] into the global equation. Readers will recall that I devoted a paragraph applauding the administration's support for the Jewish State: "*Without question,*" I wrote, "*the Bush Administration's staunch support for Israel is correct . . . fitting and proper.*" Despite this unambiguous note of gratitude, I was taken out to the woodshed by a number of readers who claimed that I was "brain dead," and "an #@!! ingrate," and that my opinions were "reprehensible." One correspondent, irate that I had the temerity to criticize his Commander-in-Chief, sarcastically reminded me that "the sun will rise tomorrow without your help." F. Scott Fitzgerald would have referred to this attack as an "objective correlative" -- defined as "too much emotion for too little cause."

As readers well know, I am on the opposite side of the political fence from the Republicans. I have virtually no confidence in Bush or his minions, and consider his administration to be even worse than that of Warren G. Harding -- heretofore, by consensus, voted the worst president in American history. And yet, Its not Bush or Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Frist, Hastert or the gang whom I'm disparaging; its their politics and policies.

In *The Republic*, Plato gave the world his theory of knowledge in the so-called "myth of the cave." In this section, Plato distinguished between two levels of awareness: opinion and knowledge. In the myth, there are loads of people gathered in a dark cave. Outside, the sun is casting shadows upon the cave wall. Most of the people inside the cave look at the shadows, and presume them to be reality. A handful turn away from the shadows, seeking the source of light. One actually exits the cave having discovered that the sun is real, the shadows a chimera.

In a sense, what passes for modern political discourse is much like Plato's myth: the overwhelming mass of Americans knows only the barbs, putdowns and "revelations." For the masses, *this* is politics. They are akin to the ancient Greeks who accept the "shadows on the cave wall" as reality. A much smaller slice of America seeks to learn about policies, positions and proposals; they are like the insightful few who turn away from the shadows. The one who actually finds the source of light, Plato refers as the "Philosopher King." So far as I know, America hasn't had such an individual since Jefferson . . .

Both parties can share blame for the dumbing down of campaigns, the utter lack of civility in American civic affairs. There is such an overwhelming sense of insecurity amongst us that disagreement and debasement now walk hand in hand.

Back in the late 60s and early 70s, those entering the Old Senate Office Building [OSOB} each morning, were privy to an amazing, object lesson in political civility. For each morning, there sat Senators George Aikin [a rock-ribbed conservative Republican from Vermont] and Mike Mansfield [a very liberal Democrat from Montana] playing chess. They did this every morning for untold years. In their own way, they were teaching that comity and civility do not have to depend upon agreement. As a result of their great regard and respect for one another as human beings, they were able to work together despite being on opposite sides of the political spectrum.

As the ancient Romans would have said, *qui me amat, amat et canem meam* - roughly, "love me, love my dog." Let us, please God, confine our arguments and disagreements to the issues, and step forth from the dank darkness of the cave into the light of the brighter, more civilized day.



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

August 24, 2006

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## The West Wing

Those logging on to this Blog will no doubt discover that something new has been added, thanks to the wizardry and thoughtfulness of Art ["The Dovster"] Galietti, my good friend and personal manager: the musical theme from *The West Wing*. Art and I share many passions: Torah study, Lavender Earl Grey Tea, box seats at Marlin's games, and *The West Wing*, to name but four. For The Dovster and me, *The West Wing* has been an unmitigated joy these past seven seasons. Together, we have watched every one of its 151 episodes, marveled at the show's realism, and wondered why the White House isn't populated with such intelligent, articulate and sagacious folks as President Josiah Bartlet [Martin Sheen], Chief of Staff Leo McGary [the late John Spencer] or Communications Director Toby Ziegler [Richard Schiff]. Over the past seven seasons, Wednesday night has meant sharing the better portion of an hour with the people we only wish could be leading this great nation.

But alas, all good things must come to an end; after 7 years, and 151 episodes involving more than 1,575 actors and actresses, *The West Wing* has gone the way of *Mash*, *Lou Grant*, and *The Paper Chase*. And despite the fact that the Bartlet Administration no longer occupies 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, it has nonetheless been honored with no less than four Emmy nominations: Best Actor [Martin Sheen], Best Actress [Allison Janney] Best Supporting Actor [Alan Alda] and Best Dramatic series.

What *made The West Wing* so special? Well, for one, it never pandered to its audience. The level of scripting, the flow of dialogue was, from first episode

to last, intelligent, articulate and insightful. None of the characters was stereotypic; rather, each was drawn from whole cloth -- a living, breathing human being filled with abilities and foibles, energy and angst. And even if the geography was a bit skewed [lots of those folks actually work in the Old Executive Office Building, not the West Wing], the pace and energy were right on the mark.

During *The West Wing's* long run, members of the conservative punditocracy accused the show of having a decidedly liberal [read: Clintonian] bias. Truth to tell, *The West Wing* did portray a liberal Democratic administration. Nonetheless, it never stooped to making Republicans look like robotic Neanderthals, nor shied away from the real give-and-take of what used to be called bipartisanship. *The West Wing* gave America -- and indeed the world -- a glimpse of what people of high ideals, personal honor, moral integrity and human weakness can accomplish if only they realize that politics, in the words of Von Bismarck, is "the art of the possible."

True, the people gracing the White House in *The West Wing*, might well have descended from Olympus or Sinai. Consider that President Bartlet was a Rhodes Scholar with a PhD in economics, his wife a still-practicing M.D. and his staff filled with high-minded idealists for whom tomorrow was vastly more important than today. Each Wednesday night we saw a president who, despite being extremely decisive, was both capable and anxious to listen to the opinions and guidance of others. Each episode involved the staff in crises both great and small, giving viewers a taste of all the ingredients that go into making up response and policy. The writers managed to navigate deftly between the Sylla of partisan victory and the Charybdis of public weal -- something that appears to woefully lacking in the real West Wing.

*The West Wing* first aired in 1999, toward the end of the Clinton/Gore years. I found myself wishing during that first season that disagreements between Congress and the White House could be handled as adroitly in real life as they were on television. Once the Bush/Cheney Administration took up

occupancy in the real West Wing, I found myself wishing that we could once again have a president who was literate, articulate and engaged -- like Bartlet or Clinton. Over the past year or so, the American public is beginning to catch on to the fact that George W. Bush is, regrettably, a lightweight; a president whose gaffs are embarrassing, whose policies are panderous, and whose vision is limited to that which will be best for his cronies, the so-called "haves and have-mores."

With a few notable exceptions, American politics no longer attracts the best and brightest. Far too often, we are saddled with men and women who get elected because they can afford to run . . . or at least know people who can make it affordable for them to run. It now takes better than 4 years to win the presidency; four years of travel, speaking, fund-raising and trying to be all things to all people. I sometimes wonder if all the candidates currently criss-crossing the country gathering up chits and I.O.U.s. ever give thought to what will happen the day after the election. Its a little reminiscent of the 1972 movie *The Candidate*, in which handsome, charismatic Bill McKay [played by handsome, charismatic Robert Redford] spends 107 minutes running for the United States Senate. The movie goes through the making, nurturing and growth of the candidate in very realistic detail. Then, in the final two minutes of the film, McKay wins. His campaign handlers burst into his hotel room and inform him that he is now Senator-elect. In the movie's final, most telling take, Redford looks squarely into the camera, blinks and says, "Oh God . . . what do I do now?" I wonder how far from reality Redford's comment truly is.

I know that the Dovster and I are going to miss our Wednesday nights with the men and women of *The West Wing*. Fortunately, that's why G-d invented DVDs; we can relive the excitement over and over again. For all its intelligence, wit, charm and hopefulness, it will no doubt earn a spot in the Television Hall of Fame.



True to its message, the last scene of the last episode ended on a note of hope. Abby Bartlet, the First Lady, is sitting with her husband in their bedroom at the White House.

"What are you thinking about?" Mrs. Dr. Bartlet asks. President Bartlet smiles, looks at his wife and says,

"Tomorrow."

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

August 31, 2006

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## A Memo To The Troops

TO: [Democratic Candidates Across the U.S.A.](#)

FROM: [Your Humble Blogger](#)

RE: [Victory in 2006 and 2008](#)

With midterm elections just around the corner and the 2008 Presidential contest already looming on the horizon, it is high time to discuss in dead earnest, what we must do [and *not* do] if we are to reverse the trend of the past several elections. It is an axiom of American politics that every campaign, every election is called "the most crucial" in our history, or "a fight for the soul of this great nation." And while such verbal puffery can indeed sound dramatic, it often swallows up and obfuscates the real, compelling issues that confront us. Having said that, I do believe that the elections of 2006 and 2008 *are* about as critical as any we've had in the past three generations.

I liken the upcoming midterm and presidential election cycles to those of 1930 and '32, when American voters faced down a Republican Congress and White House, and sent them packing into the political gloaming. After a decade of feel-good, muted Republican politics -- which led to economic disaster and political anomie -- American voters, to use the old saw, "threw the rascals out." Voters back then understood to the very core of their collective being that the Republican Congress and Republican White House were

frightfully out of touch with the lives, needs and aspirations of the common clay, and thus sent them packing. It wasn't until after World War II that the GOP got its act back together -- and that largely due to the fear they instilled by waving the bloody shirt of the Communist Conspiracy.

It is obvious that once again Republicans are in trouble. Witness the number of GOP incumbents who are running away from the Bush White House. Witness the number of entrenched officeholders who are banking that issues like abortion, gay marriage, prayer, immigration, and stem-cell research will divert attention away from far more pressing issues like the war in Iraq, our unfathomable national debt, and the strangle-hold that oil has on our national economy and aspirations. Witness the ratcheting up of verbal vitriol: within the past several days Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld likened those who question our war in Iraq with Nazi appeasers of an earlier generation. What unmitigated *chutzpah*!

If Democrats are to take back Congress in 2006 and recapture the White House in 2008, certain fundamental "rules of the political road" will have to be observed:

1. **Keep the message positive:** Already, we are seeing Democratic candidates slinging buckets of political mud on each other. While most campaign gurus and consultants stress going negative, the American voting public actually yearns to hear that which is both uplifting and positive. Negativity breeds resentment, and resentment keeps people away from the polls. When candidates continually attack one another for a vote they cast twelve years ago, or for what they did or said in college, it leaves voters with the feeling that politicians are venal, shallow and willing to do or say anything in order to get elected. The party of Jefferson, Jackson, Wilson, Roosevelt and Clinton would do well to take a page from the party of Harding, Coolidge, Nixon and Bush: thou shalt not speak negatively about another member of thine own party."

2. **Hold Republican Feet to the Fire:** Here is another page that can be taken out of the Republican playbook. Democrats would be wise to ask pointed questions such as: *Do you feel safer today than you did five years ago? Are you satisfied that the massive tax cuts which the Republican Congress and Republican White House have bestowed upon the very, very wealthy are good for you, your family or our economy? Do you think that the Republican response to Hurricane Katrina shows either compassion or political will? Are you satisfied with the price of gas, the billions upon billions we are spending in Iraq, or the White House's response to global warming?*
3. **Issue a National Challenge:** It seems to me that among the many, many things that have been missing from the American political scene these past many years, the issue of a "national challenge" is most glaring and obvious. Harkening back to John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." Democrats would do well to solidify a national message that includes an overarching challenge and a set of national goals. Remember, Kennedy staked us to landing a man on the moon within a decade, created the Peace Corps, encouraged people to take 50-mile hikes and otherwise raised the level of enthusiasm. For far too long, our political leaders have asked for nothing -- save our votes and our acquiescence. I believe that one national challenge that would strike a wonderfully resounding chord is energy independence. While President Bush will publicly state that America is "addicted to oil" at the drop of a hat, neither he, his administration nor his toadying Congress will do thing one about it. Democrats can fill this alarming void by waging "the moral equivalent of war" on our energy dependence. We can propose a massive technical/intellectual/scientific assault on the problem which will create new avenues of power. From wind and geothermal to solar and -- dare we even dream? -- anti-matter, this is an issue that can easily affect everything from conflicts in the Middle East to global warming and the creation of jobs.

4. **Stay on Message:** Assuming that Democrats can agree upon a cogent, unified message, they must stay on point, and not be pulled hither, thither and yon by petty internecine squabbles or the base venality of political greed.
5. **Start Catering to the Best, not the Worst in the American Electorate:** For the past generation, Republicans have been treating the American voting public as if they were vassals of a great feudal lord. They have run their campaigns -- and administrations -- as private fiefdoms and rarely -- if ever -- been honest with the American people. And although we are certainly not all Rhodes Scholars or members of Mensa, it doesn't take all that much to understand that we can do one heck of a lot better . . . if we all work together.

Let the races begin.

And to the victors go not so much the spoils of war, but the challenges of the future . . .

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August 31, 2006 in Political Opinion | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

September 07, 2006

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## How Low Can You Go?

It is my sad duty to report that anyone who questions the American military's continuing role in Iraq, or seriously doubts the Bush Administration's contention that fighting in Iraq somehow makes us safer from acts of international terror at home, is "morally and intellectually confused," and no better than the folks who "ridiculed or ignored" the rise Nazism in the 1930s. "How's that?" you ask. "We're morally confused? We're like the Nazi appeasers of the 1930s?" Yes indeed. With one fetid verbal blast, Secretary of State Donald H. Rumsfeld has likened a vast segment of the American public to "Nazi appeasers" of yesteryear. To my way of thinking, Secretary Rumsfeld has a faulty understanding of history at best, or at worst, has taken total leave of his senses. His contention -- and that of his boss and much of the national Republican leadership -- is as dangerous and as gross an assault on the intelligence of the American people as any conceived since the days of the late, unlamented Senator Joe McCarthy.

*[By the way, included in the crowd that, far from ignoring the rise Nazism, actually helped foster its rise, was George W.'s*

*grandfather, Prescott Bush. As a partner in the Wall Street firm Brown Brothers, Harriman, Prescott Bush [father of George H.P., and grandfather of George W. and Jeb] was linked to the rise of Nazism through German industrialist Fritz Thyssen, an early supporter of Adolf Hitler. Prescott Bush served as a director of the Union Banking Company, which was originally established to manage Thyssen's American holdings. From the mid-1920s to the latter 1930s, Prescott Bush and his cronies were responsible for selling more than \$50 million worth of German bonds to the American investing public. So much for Rumsfeld's and G.W. Bush's understanding of history. It makes one wonder about the value of a Princeton or a Yale education!]*

It is nothing short of astounding that Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney & Company have chosen this precise moment in time to ratchet up their defense of our failed venture in Iraq. Instead of using the brains, time and talent at their disposal to figure out how to stage an orderly, expedient removal of our forces from Iraq, they are spending their time dreaming up a new rhetorical campaign to justify old mistruths and vilify those who have seen through them. Rumsfeld is deserving of our condemnation and needs to be put out to pasture. Will this happen? You bet: the day *after* either the Cubs or the Royals win the World Series. Senate Republicans won't even allow the topic to be *discussed* on the Hill, much less seriously considered. . .

I can't believe for one millisecond that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld,

Rove and the rest of the gang actually believe what they're telling the American public -- that our war in Iraq is meant to keep America safe, that we had to take out Saddam because of all the WMDs he had stockpiled, or that "as Iraqi military forces stand up, American forces will stand down." As Grandma Anne used to say, "they're full of canal water."

Truth to tell, the Bushies have been caught with their pants down enough times to merit arrest on charges of indecent exposure. Remember the president's gleeful "Mission Accomplished!" photo-op on board the U.S.S. Lincoln way back in May of 2003? Remember the White House's iron-clad promise that the war and eventual rebuilding of Iraq would cost no more than \$3 billion, or that the lion's share of the funding would come from our allies and Iraqi oil sales? How about the "incontrovertible link" betwixt Osama and Saddam? And while we're at it, did you notice that just the other day -- a mere two months before the next midterm election -- that the president finally remembers the name Osama bin Laden?

Poll after poll shows that the Bush Administration's "War on Terror" is losing support here in America. Even members of his own party are beginning to question whether Rumsfeld and the Pentagon have any long-range policy -- save that of continuing to enrich their friends at Halliburton and Bechtel. Unbelievably, American forces have now been in Iraq longer than our Army, Navy, Marines and Air Corps were in Europe during World War II.



The defeat of Hitler took less time than the punishing of Hussein and bin Laden.

Make no mistake about it: we are going to be hearing more and more of the old rhetoric dressed up in newer and punchier verbiage between now and the first Tuesday in November. Critical issues ranging from Immigration Reform and our staggering National Debt to Global Warming and the criminally high cost of medical care and prescription drugs are going to be virtually ignored. What we shall hear *ad nauseum* is how the Republicans -- and only the Republicans -- can save America from the scourge they now have labeled "Islamofascism." We will undoubtedly hear that a vote for the Democrats [now called "Defeatocrats"] is a vote for Osama and terror. To play politics with the safety and wellbeing of a nation isn't just maddening; it is absolutely immoral.

The day before 9/11, Secretary Rumsfeld gave a speech to Pentagon employees in which he proclaimed, "The topic today is an adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America." During this speech, the secretary went on to explain that this adversary "crushes new ideas" with "brutal consistency" and "disrupts the defense of the United States." It is a foe, he proclaimed, "more subtle and implacable" than the former Soviet Union, he continued, stronger and larger and "closer to home" than "the last decrepit dictators in the world."

And who was this ominous enemy to whom the Secretary was referring? Saddam Hussein? Osama bin Laden? Kim Jong II? Not even close. The implacable foe was none other than . . . the Pentagon!

And Mr. Rumsfeld and his boss accuse those who question the war in Iraq of being "intellectually confused!" Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

As the midterm elections loom on the horizon, there are many, many questions to ask of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the Republican leadership. None, perhaps, are more trenchant than "how low can you go?" "Just how far are you willing to go in order to hold on to a Republican House and Senate?" "Does the truth ever enter into your deliberations?"

Indeed, how low can you go?

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September 07, 2006 in Lunacy and Outrages | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

September 14, 2006

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## The Torturer's Apprentice

So tell me: what's the Administration's latest rationale for "staying the course" in Iraq? Protecting America and the free world from terrorism? Fostering democracy where heretofore there was dictatorship and now there is anarchy? Preserving the flow of oil? You tell me, because I really haven't a clue. And while we're at it, has anyone ferreted out what the Administration's notion of "victory" is? How in the world will we ever know when we've won? And what, pray tell, will it be that we have won?

Now that the Senate has concluded its own exhaustive investigation -- and concluded that there were simply no Weapons of Mass Destruction [WMD] in Iraq -- one might logically assume that the Bush Administration would no longer use it as a rationale. One might conclude . . . but one would be wrong, wrong, wrong. Unbelievably, both Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld have continued to link our military action in Iraq to the existence of Hussein's WMD's. Eerily, at the same time they are continuing to defend this linkage, the

President when asked what the relationship between al-Qaeda and Iraq was, simply and rather disarmingly stated, "none at all."

The term "America's War on Terror" continues to be used with the greatest of ease and facility. It continues to trip off the tongue of Republicans from Northern New Hampshire to Southern California. And yet, it has also been conclusively shown that far from being in league with one another, Saddam and bin Laden had [and likely continue to have] a murderous antipathy towards one another. In other words, there never was any link between these two forces of extreme malevolence. Invading Iraq as America's primary response to the devastation of 9/11, now appears to make precious little sense. Sending troops to Afghanistan: now *that* made sense. Remember how in the first days and weeks following 9/11 -- when the globe was united in its support, sympathy and revulsion over what we'd just undergone -- W told the world that America would spare no expense and do whatever it took to hunt down bin Laden and the murderers of al-Qaeda? And so, we went off to Afghanistan -- only to let bin Laden escape from Tora Bora.

For the better part of the next two and-a-half years, the name bin Laden was all but forgotten by the Administration. Now, with about seven weeks to go until the midterm elections, it has magically resurfaced. Bin Laden: the man whom Bush at one time declared was "public enemy number one," and then, less than a year later, admitted "not really giving much thought to."

Despite a welter of fact debunking the "9/11/Iraq/War on Terror" connection, a substantial minority of the American public continues to believe that the battle against terror will be won on the streets of Baghdad. Maddeningly, the Bush Administration sees no reason to disabuse people of this continued misconception. Indeed, it is absolutely essential to their underlying plan.

Just yesterday -- September 13, 2006 -- Congress's Republican leadership threw its political weight behind two of the president's most controversial -- and frightening -- national security programs: warrantless wiretapping and extra-judicial military tribunals. The *good news* is that party leaders are having a bit of a time getting all their members on board. [Notable amongst the "missing" on this issue is Virginia Senator John Warner, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee]. The *even better news* is that by backing the president's legislative demands, the leadership risks being labeled by the Democrats as a rubber stamp for an increasingly unpopular president -- something that could easily work against the GOP in the upcoming elections.

The *bad news* is that the Administration is oh so close to getting what it wants: the continued ability to monitor overseas phone calls and emails of Americans when one party is suspected of terrorism. The *even worse news* is that the House Armed Services Committee [the fiefdom of California Republican Duncan Hunter], by a vote of 52 to 8, ratified the White House's version of

legislation creating military commissions for trying terrorism suspects. This measure would give Bush the authority he seeks to withhold classified evidence from defendants, admit testimony that defendants might maintain was coerced, and protect U.S. intelligence agents from legal action over their interrogation methods. In other words, if you want to use torture . . . it's OK by us.

I find it utterly amazing that average, everyday citizens are supporting both these measures as reasonable, prudent responses to terrorists and terrorism. "I don't care if the government secretly wiretaps my phone calls or emails," one benighted citizen wrote to the editor of the *Ft. Lauderdale News Sun Sentinel*: "I have nothing to hide." "I personally could care less whether or not they torture these animals," another wrote. "You can't fight animals with one hand tied behind your back." I don't know about you, but I shudder to think how much freedom and humanity we're being asked to cede in the name of national security. Am I the only one who finds it both illogical and disingenuous to stake a claim for freedom, liberty and democracy for the folks of Iraq, while at the same time seeking to scuttle personal liberty here at home? Unlike the letter-writer, I don't know if I have anything to hide. Not that I'm a terrorist, support terrorism in any way, shape or form, or have contact with anyone who does. However, what's to say that my being a "liberal" [I put that in quotes because, for the life of me, I don't really know

what the term means in the mind of "compassionate conservatives"] hasn't put me on somebody's "ought to be listened in on" list?

It feels like nascent fascism, the warrentless wiretaps, the secret military tribunals, the resorting to torture "if necessary." "Impossible!" you say? Just remember that when fascism came to 1930s Germany, it wasn't via the sword, the pistol or the Molotov cocktail. No, it came via the ballot box; the German people elected Hitler to office . . .

If Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove, Frist, Hastert and the rest want to become the Torturer's Apprentice, it thereby becomes the solemn obligation of the American public to remove them from office; the sooner the better. For they stand accused not only of mendacity and duplicity, but also of brazenly attempting to restrict our rights in the name of freedom.

So tell me again: what's the reason we continue fighting in Iraq?

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

September 21, 2006

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## A Slogan For The Ages?

When I'm not spending precious moments with my family [which includes our Chocolate Lab "Ginger Rogers" and three cats], out giving lectures [anywhere between 4 and 8 a week], preparing sermons for the High Holidays [yes, I am still a practicing rabbi], or working out at the gym, I can generally be found with my nose in some turgid historic tome. Most of my "extracurricular" reading deals with American political history; I'm writing a revised, updated edition of my book, *The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill*, due to be published -- please God -- in early 2008 by Rowman & Littlefield.

The past couple of days, I've been immersing myself in a study of political slogans. It is simply unbelievable how many mottos and catchphrases have been employed by campaigners throughout history. Believe me when I tell you that they aren't confined to America. Way back in ancient Rome, as but one example, Cato the Elder rallied support for his favorite foreign policy initiative by endlessly shouting the simple, brutal slogan **"Carthage must be destroyed!"**

American Presidential campaigns have long been known for slogans and gimmickry. One of the best-known slogans, **"Tippicanoe and Tyler too"** comes from the 1840 race -- the election which, despite featuring a couple of political nobodies, marked the birth of political campaigning as we know it today. One of the zanier gimmicks was the practice of rolling a huge ball covered with a candidate's political slogans from town to town. From this emerged the expression **"Keep the ball rolling."** Slogans have ranged from the brilliantly



witty to the downright nasty. Among my favorites from past Presidential tilts are:

- **"Sunflowers Die in November"** -- FDR's 1936 Presidential slogan. This was in reference to his opponent, Alf Landon, whose home state of Kansas has the Sunflower as its official state flower.
- **"A Time For Greatness"** -- one of slogans used in JFK's 1960 race.
- **"We Polked you in '44, We shall Pierce you in '52"** -- Slogan of Presidential candidate Franklin Pierce. The '44 referred to the 1844 election of James Knox Polk as President.
- **"Grandfather's hat fits Ben"** -- 1888 Presidential slogan of Benjamin Harrison, whose grandfather, William Henry Harrison ["Old Tippcanoe" himself] was elected President in 1840.

When it comes to sheer political *chutzpah*, my all time favorite comes from the 1884 Presidential race. In that contest, Maine Republican James G. Blaine [an unsuccessful candidate for his party's nomination in both 1876 and 1880], squared off against New York Governor Grover Cleveland. Blaine's supporters crisscrossed the country chanting **"Ma, Ma, Where's my Pa?"** a clear and unmistakable reference to Cleveland, who had fathered an illegitimate child in 1874. When Cleveland won [just barely], *his* supporters added the punchline, **"Gone to the White House, Ha, Ha, Ha!"**

While making lists of slogans, I began musing over the coming November election, pondering what message or slogan might be best for both Democrat and Republican candidates. For Democrats, perhaps the most fitting would be either **"We're not Republicans!"** or **"Together, we can do much, much better."** Yes, I know, neither of them are terribly witty or imaginative. But to my way of thinking, what they lack in zip or verbal dexterity they more than make up for in unmistakable directness. Within a few terse words, they get across a ton of message .

And what of the Republicans? I can just imagine the G.O.P. brain trust sitting around a polished conference table at some covenant-restricted country club going back-and-forth about what *their* message should be. Unfortunately, my crystal ball is a bit beclouded; I haven't the slightest idea what their slogan is going to be. However, my cynical self can perceive them snickering about their underlying strategy; about what message they're going to have to get across in order to keep both House and Senate within Republican hands. That strategy -- or message -- can perhaps be best summed up by three words: "Fear," "Smear," and "Queer." We can already see the strategy at work:

**Fear:** In the last days of this, the 109th Congress, Representatives and Senators are debating such "security" issues as torture and the mandating of photo IDs at the polls. Moreover, just yesterday [Wednesday September 20, 2006] the House Intelligence Committee issued a report warning that the terrorist danger facing America is "more alarming than the threat that existed prior to September 11, 2001." According to committee chair Peter Hoekstra, R-Mich., "there are a growing number of groups building the capability to attack the United States, our allies and our interests abroad." Don't be surprised if just before the election, our color-coded warning level is raised to red, meaning "critical." In the Republican strategists' reading of public opinion polls, they no doubt believe that engendering fear will keep a majority of voters within their camp. "Democrats," so implies this gambit, "are either unwilling or incapable of keeping America safe."

**Smear:** Already, candidates from Bangor to Bakersfield are telling voters about the youthful indiscretions and misdeeds of their opponents. To be fair, candidates and campaigns on both side of the political aisle are engaging in lethal mud-slinging. To listen to some of the things being said about candidates -- mostly on the part of incumbents against their challengers -- one finds it hard to believe how these people are permitted to run for office -- let alone stay out of jail! Of course, the more time spent smearing one's opponent, the less time a candidate need worry him/herself about the intricacies of issues

or the basics of problem-solving. And although the most recent public opinion polls show a slight rise in the President's approval rating [now anywhere between 41-44%], the newest *New York Times* poll indicates that just 25% of the public approves of the way Congress is doing its job. And that is the lowest mark since 1994 -- when Republicans finally took back the House.

**Queer:** An omnipresent ingredient in the Republican cauldron, of course, is the package of value-laden "culture-of-life" issues, such as abortion, gay-marriage, flag-burning and embryonic stem-cell research. This bundle of issues has long been a proven winner for the G.O.P, perhaps best "sloganized" a couple of years back as "**God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.**" Republican strategists fully expect voters to read the message between the lines: Democrats are Godless, anti-Christian and morally equivocal. In other words, a vote for the G.O.P. is a vote for God.

Will the G.O.P.'s **Fear, Smear and Queer** strategy work? Your guess is as good as mine, although my arthritic big toe tells me that a growing segment of the American voting public is finally beginning to wise up; beginning to finally realize that perhaps -- just perhaps -- entrusting Congress to the Republicans for another 2 years or the White House for another 4 to 8, may not be in this nation's best interest. More and more, people are remembering back to a time -- not that ago -- when our coffers were full, gas was under \$2.00 a gallon, our reputation and ability to lead the community of nations was strong, and "**It's time to change America**" was the winning slogan.

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September 21, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

September 28, 2006

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## Edward R. Murrow Lives!

On March 17, 1944, writer/dramatist/essayist/critic John O'Hara [1905-1970] published a movie review in *Newsweek* magazine, the likes of which had never before -- or likely since -- been seen. It began, in part:

"It is with exceeding regret that your faithful bystander reports that he has just seen a picture which he thinks must be the best picture he ever saw."

"With no less regret, he reports that he has just seen the best actor in the history of acting."

"Name of picture: *Citizen Kane*."

"Name of actor: Orson Welles."

"Reason for regret: you, my dear, may never see the picture . . ."

O'Hara's rather bold and refreshingly honest introductory comments came to mind the other night as I was watching MSNBC anchor Keith Olbermann deliver an equally bold and refreshingly honest commentary on the September 22nd Bill Clinton/Chris Wallace interview imbroglio. For those who have been living in the proverbial cave, on the Friday, September 22 edition of "FOX News Sunday," interviewer Chris Wallace had former President Bill Clinton on as his guest. Although Clinton was led to believe that their conversation would deal primarily with the "Clinton Forum" [the international group to which Richard Branson just pledged an incredible \$3 billion for Clinton's Global Warming initiative], Wallace essentially sandbagged Mr. Clinton:

**Wallace:** "When we announced that you were going to be on FOX News Sunday, I got a lot of e-mail from viewers, and I've got to say I was surprised most of them wanted me to ask you this question: Why didn't you do more to put bin Laden and al Qaeda out of business when you were President?"

With eyes widening in disbelief, Clinton proceeded -- angrily, emotionally and forcefully -- to answer Wallace's [or, if Wallace is to be believed, his "viewers"] question. As befits a world-class policy wonk, Clinton laid on fact after fact of what his administration did and did not do in the hunt for Osama. As befits a superior [and highly partisan politician], Clinton exposed Wallace as nothing more than a lackey for the hostile conservative interests that own and operate the FOX network:

**Wallace:** "Do you think you did enough [in hunting down and assassinating bin Laden]?"

**Clinton:** "No, because I didn't get him. But at least I tried. That's the difference between me and some, including all the right-wingers who are attacking me now. They ridiculed me for trying. They had eight months [between George W. Bush's inauguration and 9/11] to try and didn't. *I tried*. So I tried. When I failed, I left a comprehensive anti-terror strategy and the best guy in the country: Dick Clarke.

Having delivered himself of this factual onslaught, policy-wonk Clinton became partisan-warrior Clinton:

**Clinton:** "So you [Chris Wallace] did FOX's bidding on this show. You did a nice little conservative hit-job on me. . . I want to know how many people in the Bush Administration you've asked this question of?"

Predictably, most members of the print and electronic media honed in on not *what* the former President had to say in response to Wallace's question, but rather the *manner* in which he said it.

Enter Keith Olbermann.

In Olbermann's aforementioned scathing commentary, he used the Wallace/Clinton interview as a jumping-off point for putting not only Wallace, but President Bush, his administration, its so-called "War on Terrorism" and their "All's Fair in Conservative-Republican Political Ambition" philosophy on trial. And, like John O'Hara, he did not mince words. Referring to Wallace as "a monkey posing as a newscaster," Olbermann mused that " . . . had I in one moment surrendered all my credibility as a journalist, and been irremediably humiliated, as he was, I would have gone home and started a new career selling seeds by mail." Olbermann also lashed out at the media for covering only the tone of Mr. Clinton's response, and not his words:

"It is not important that that the current President's portable public chorus has described his predecessor's tone as 'crazed.' Our tone should be crazed. The nation's freedoms are under assault by an administration whose policies can do as much damage as al Qaeda; the nation's marketplace of ideas is being poisoned by a propaganda company so blatant that Tokyo Rose would have quit."

"Nonetheless, the headline is this: Bill Clinton has done what almost none of us have done in [the past] five years. He has spoken the truth about 9/11, and the current presidential administration."

Included in Olbermann's nearly-11 minute commentary were the following observations:

- "For the past five years, one month and two weeks, the current administration, and in particular the President, has been given the greatest 'pass' for incompetence and malfeasance in American history."
- "Mr. Bush, if you are now trying by proxy [Chris Wallace] to convince us that it's all about the distractions of 1998 and 1999 [Monica Lewinsky and the Clinton impeachment trial], then you will have to face a startling fact that your minions may have hidden from you. The distractions of 1998 and 1999, Mr. Bush, were carefully manufactured, and lovingly

executed, not by Bill Clinton, but by the same people who got you elected President."

- "The free pass has been withdrawn Mr. Bush. You did not act to prevent 9/11. We do not know what you have done to prevent another 9/11. You have failed us -- then leveraged that failure, to justify a purposeless war in Iraq . . . You have failed us in Afghanistan. And you have now tried to hide your failures by blaming your predecessor."

Keith Olbermann's commentary [which can be seen in it's entirety at <http://www.alternet.org/blogs/peek/42155/>] hearkens back to the power and forcefulness of a John O'Hara review. The courage he displays in "telling it like it is" hearkens back to the greatest of all electronic journalists, the late, great Edward R. Murrow. In his prime, Murrow [1908-1965], like many correspondents, served as the eyes and the ears of a nation at war. But more importantly -- and here is the tie-in to Keith Olbermann -- Morrow was the voice of conscience, a man who understood that there are times when the journalist's most crucial task is broadcasting the hard truths that many wish left unuttered. [Indeed, following a graphic account of what the Nazis had wrought at the notorious Buchenwald Death Camp, Murrow proclaimed: "I pray you to believe what I have said about Buchenwald. I have reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words. *If I've offended you for this rather mild account of Buchenwald, I'm not in the least bit sorry.*

Perhaps . . . just perhaps, between Bill Clinton's powerful presence and Keith Olbermann's fearless commentary, the American public will begin to wake up to the horrors of this administration, its Congress and the corporate lapdogs who so blithely applaud its every pronouncement.

Keith Olbermann should, as we say, "be well and live to 120," and remain employed by MSNBC. May he continue to write and speak without fear or compromise. And when in the distant future, he shakes off this mortal coil, may his epitaph been the same that adorns the final resting place of John

O'Hara in Princeton: "Better than anyone else, he told the truth about his time. He was a professional. He wrote honestly and well."

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September 28, 2006 in The American Scene . . . | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

October 5, 2006

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## Eureka! An Article That's Not About Mark Foley

By this point in time, I'm sure we are all feeling a bit over-saturated [satiated?] with all the minute-by-minute accounts, stories, articles and op-ed pieces on former Rep. Mark Foley. Creating a piece on this incredibly smarmy episode is akin to [and just as futile as] trying to write an article about a tennis match while it's in progress; no sooner does one commit a single word to paper or screen, then the situation changes.

As I sit at my computer [Thursday, October 5, 2006, 12:55 p.m. EDT] . . .

- Things are looking awfully bleak for Speaker Hastert; he may well be out of a job by the time you read this.
- Kirk Fordham, Rep. Foley's one-time political amanuensis, has fallen on his sword in order to protect his current boss, New York Representative [and National Republican Congressional Committee Chair] Tom Reynolds.
- Conservative punditocrats like our boy Rush are screaming that the entire unseemly mess is really a conspiracy on the part of National Democrats.
- Comparisons between Mark "he didn't have sex with anyone" Foley and Bill "what he did was truly reprehensible" Clinton are blowing about like leaves in the wind.
- Progressive pundits are wondering aloud what a Democratic House and Senate will be able to accomplish, assuming the upcoming elections are the Republicans' worst nightmare. Will they launch partisan congressional investigations on Iraq, warrantless wiretaps, torture, collusion and influence peddling, or will they seek bipartisan support in the areas of renewable energy, global warming and the scaling back of Bush's mammoth upper-income tax cuts?
- It's beginning to dawn on Republicans that not only are they in danger of losing both their Congressional majority and their beatified halos, but that the Democrats might begin being viewed as the true Party of Moral Values.

Any way you stack it, what we are witnessing, is likely the political version of shifting tectonic plates; a situation which changes both climate and topography.

OK, so as promised in this Blog article's title, this is not another piece about Mark Foley. I'll leave the note-taking to those who operate in the realm of instant media. Rather, I'd would like to do a bit of a follow-up to an article we published back on September 9: "How Low Can You Go?" Thanks to the prodding of one of this Blog's constant readers, the piece was sent out to the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*, which duly ran it in its entirety [along with a pretty snazzy political cartoon] on September 18. For those who would like to refresh their memory of that article, please go to [Put Rumsfeld out to pasture: South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#).

For the most part, readers' comments were wonderfully supportive; most believed that Rumsfeld should resign -- the sooner the better. But low and behold, the article did manage to irritate a nerve in Washington, because just this past Monday [Yom Kippur], the Sun Sentinel "letters to the editor" page contained a rebuttal from no less a personage than the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, A. Dorrance Smith. You can read Secretary Smith's letter at [Column misquotes Rumsfeld remarks: South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#). Smith's letter contends that I misquoted his boss, the Def. Sec. According to Smith, Rummie never said that those who question or oppose the war in Iraq are "morally and intellectually confused," and no better than those who "ignored or ridiculed" the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. So says Secretary Smith.

One should know that before joining the administration, A. Dorrance Smith served as executive producer of both "Nightline" [1989-1991], "This Week With Sam Donaldson and Cokie Robertson" [1999-2000] and was in charge of political coverage for ABC News [during which time it became addicted to scandal]. His last position prior to becoming Secretary Rumsfeld's mouthpiece was as media advisor to Coalition Provisional Authority Ambassador L. Paul Bremer. During that time, he wrote an article for *The Wall Street Journal* "blasting all major television networks and the government of Qatar for cooperating with *Al-Jazeera* in showing gruesome battlefield footage obtained by the Arab television channel in Iraq."

In *his Wall Street Journal* piece, Smith lambasted what he termed "the ongoing relationship between terrorists, *Al-Jazeera* and all the networks," and wondered aloud if the U.S. government should maintain normal relations with Qatar so long as its government continued to subsidize *Al-Jazeera*. This article so infuriated Michigan Senator Carl Levin, that he questioned whether Smith was the sort of man "who should be representing the United States Government." As a result, Levin put what is called a "hold" on Smith's nomination for Assistant Secretary of Defense; he wasn't confirmed until April of this year.

Secretary Smith's contention that his boss was misquoted is an old Washington ploy that goes something like this:

1. Claim misquotation or misrepresentation.
2. Don't cite the "real" statement, but rather
3. Offer readers a place where they can go to read what was "really" said, knowing full well that few will actually avail themselves of the opportunity.
4. Those few who do go to the "source" will likely become frustrated wading through mountains of verbiage, without finding what they're looking for, but will nonetheless
5. Assume that your denial is the God's honest truth.

I stand by my original article; in the current political climate, I would have to be out of my cotton-picking mind to deliberately misquote [or worse, fabricate quotes from] anyone in this administration. It is, nonetheless, both daunting and a tad-paranoia inducing to discover that one's opinions are being monitored by the Department of Defense. When I told Alice, [my 82 1/2-year old teenage mother who is one part Kate Hepburn and and three parts Betty Bacall] about the letter, she was at first proud ["Great having Rumsfeld as an enemy"] and then just a bit concerned. Do consider that she lived through McCarthyism out in Hollywood, where lots and lots of good people lost their fortunes, their careers and in a couple of cases, even their lives, due to their political opinions, writings or associations. As a result of having gone through those times she will frequently, after making a political comment [her place on the spectrum is just about where you'd expect a mother of mine to be], add "and in case anyone's listening, I'm just a little old lady!"

Behind the humor is, nonetheless, a rather serious and telling point -- a point that leads us back to the Foley fiasco. It seems to be increasingly possible that the revelations of the past week or ten days could deliver Congress into Democratic hands. If so, there are going to be hundreds of pairs of eyes and hundreds of sets of ears paying attention to precisely what this administration and its lapdog Congress have done to both the United States government and the American people these past 5-plus years: raging deficits, an unwinnable war against an enemy we cannot see, let alone defeat, an all but total disregard for the rule of law, children, the elderly and the middle class, a smug, "holier-than-anyone" attitude, scandals involving gambling, forced abortions and trading votes for personal gain, and on and on and on . . . If indeed, this tectonic shift comes to pass, and that the likes of Hastert, Boehner, Blunt, Sensenbrenner, Thomas and Barton are replaced by people like Pelosi, Hoyer, Miller [of California], Conyers, Rangel and Waxman, then I for one will breath a lot easier. I may even offer up a tiny prayer of thanks to Mark Foley, a sick, sick man whose personal, political and psychic meltdown was the straw that finally broke the camel's [or in this case, the elephant's] back.

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

October 12, 2006

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## I Rejoice That I'm Not A Republican!

H[enry] L[ewis] Mencken [1880-1956] was, in his day, known as both "The



Sage of Baltimore" and "The American Nietzsche." One of the most influential American writers of the 20th century, Mencken was, variously, a crack-journalist and newspaper columnist [he was the first one to label the Scopes case "The Monkey Trial"], pundit, literary critic, philosopher and first-rate curmudgeon. He was also a world-class cynic, a rebellious lout, an equal-opportunity bigot, a two-fisted drinking, cigar-smoking misogynist and one of the most humorously, trenchantly quotable men of all time. A brief sampling of the Mencken quill, when dipped in the ink of caustic wit:

- *"Conscience is a mother-in-law who never leaves."*
- *"For every problem, there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong."*
- *No one every went broke underestimating the bad taste of the American public."*
- *"A politician is an animal which can sit on the fence and yet keep both ears on the ground."*
- *"If a politician found out he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner."*
- *"Elections are a sort of advanced auction sale of stolen goods."*

And one of my all time favorites:

- *"In this world of sin and sorrow, there is always something to be thankful for; as for me, I rejoice that I am not a Republican."*

I've got to believe that were Mencken still alive and writing for the *Baltimore Sun*, he would be leading the charge for a Democratic takeover of the House and Senate in next month's mid-term election, and the White House in 2008. Without question, he would have used many of the arrows in his journalistic quiver to puncture the GOP's moralistic balloon. He no doubt would have discovered [and railed against] the meaninglessness of such Republican buzz-terms as *Compassionate Conservative*, and *Family Values*, and severely question how in the world a political party that squanders a multi-trillion dollar budget surplus in less than four years can continue calling itself *fiscally responsible*. Unquestionably, he would have written extensively -- not to mention caustically -- about the absurdity of cutting taxes for the wealthiest one percent while at the same time waging war.

I am reasonably certain that Mencken would have fulminated against Republican attempts to suspend *habeas corpus*, abridge free speech, justify the torture and illegal imprisonment of those suspected of being terrorists, and turn a virtual blind eye to those left homeless by Hurricane Katrina -- unless they happen to be United States Senators residing in Mississippi.

As a curmudgeonly satirist, Mencken was at his pungent best when trashing democracy. In truth, he was a fervent believer in the *theoretical* brilliance of our political system. Where he diverged --and angrily so -- was in the *reality* of its practice: he saw that far too often, the overarching task of political animals was simply getting themselves reelected. Writing during the worst days of the latter Hoover Administration, Mencken noted *"democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance. . . the worship of jackals by jackasses."* He could easily have been writing about the George W. Bush

Administration, which has treated the vast majority of the American public with the disdain a medieval lord showed indentured peons .

The political tide does appear to be rolling out for Republicans from Maine to California. Christian Conservatives -- the one political bloc that the G.O.P. has taken for granted -- are now beginning to question its allegiance to a party populated with the likes of Tom DeLay, Jack Abramoff, Mark Foley, William Bennett [the moralizing former Secretary of Education with a penchant for high-stakes poker] and Karl Rove, Bush's so-called "brain." According to "Tempting Faith," a book by David Kuo, former number two man in the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, Rove used the office for scoring political points with Christian Conservatives -- a group he continually referred to as "the nuts."

It is becoming clearer with each passing news cycle that the Rove-inspired "win at all costs" strategy is beginning to lose traction. It also appears that members of the Republican Congressional leadership, who have known about Mark Foley's predilection for young male pages for quite a few years, decided that holding on to a political seat was more important than smoking out a pederast

In response to these and a myriad of other damning failures and disclosures, Republicans continue to campaign as if they are still the "Party of God," the only thing that stands between America's moral, physical and economic well being and the very gates of hell. The president delivers this message not to the American public at large, but rather to cherry-picked gatherings of his incredibly well-heeled backers. And how in the name of all that is holy, you may ask, could supposedly smart, sophisticated people swallow all this political bilge and duplicity? The answer is simple: they are the very ones towards whom all those mammoth tax-cuts have been directed. The Republicans have scratched their backs; now is the time for them to repay the favor.

Were H. L. Mencken around today, I am sure that he would look upon our recent political history and wonder aloud what went wrong. He would likely ask how it happened that patriotism became nothing more than a rhetorical device, that government became the purview of private business, and that politics devolved into puerility.

Mencken's forte was pricking the balloons of the smug, the self-righteous and self-aggrandizing. When it came to answers, he generally stood off in the corner. For as he was wont to say, *"I am strongly in favor of common sense, common honesty and common decency. This makes me forever ineligible for public office."*

And like the Sage of Baltimore, I too rejoice that I am not a Republican . .

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October 12, 2006 in Political Opinion | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

October 20, 2006

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## The Dumbing Down of the American Electorate

Down here in South Florida, we are in the midst of one of the nation's most heated, contentious House races. Pitting Democratic term-limited Florida State Senator Ron Klein [see my May 26, 2006 Blog article "There's Good News Tonight"] versus 13-term incumbent E. Clay Shaw, the race has drawn national attention and will likely wind up costing in excess of \$10 million. TEN MILLION DOLLARS for a single House race!

Senator Klein began running 20- and 30-second television spots several months ago; Representative Shaw's ads didn't begin airing until early September. I would imagine that combined, their spots must run about 500 times a day, 7 days a week. And yet, unless one were a rabid political junkie, it would next to impossible to tell where either candidate stands on any of the critical issues facing the nation, the State of Florida, or the people of the Twenty-Second District. "Not much bang for the buck," I can hear you grumbling. And you are almost correct.

You see, what all those millions of dollars and thousands of minutes have disseminated is precisely the opposite of what an enlightened electorate truly needs: positive information. Instead, what potential voters are being fed is a steady diet of negativity. One can watch Klein or Shaw spots from sun up till sun down and come away with the feeling that far from deserving our precious votes, the two men -- both incumbent and challenger -- are incompetent,



duplicitous, avaricious, totally untrustworthy, and likely guilty of both high crimes and misdemeanors. At least that's what Rep. Shaw has informed us about Sen. Klein, and what Sen. Klein has implied about Rep. Shaw. Stuff and nonsense!

I happen to be pretty well acquainted with both men and although I am far more in agreement with Senator Klein than Representative Shaw, know both of them to be kind, decent, thoughtful, honest public servants. Why then all the negativity? Why does the less informed voter come away wondering not who to vote for but rather how either man isn't doing a stretch in the pokey? The simple answer is, "Well, that's just the nature of the political beast . . . win at all costs." A reasonable rejoinder would be "Oh yeah? And at what price?"

The "price," I fear, is far too high, and causes the most sincere amongst us to become hardened cynics. For what we are witnessing in this campaign -- and in campaigns all over the U.S. of A., is the continued "dumbing down" of the American electorate. Now mind you, this is not something that spontaneously sprung to life last Tuesday. No, the dumbing down to which I refer has been a looming constant in American political campaigns for at least the last generation if not two. It exists in an inverse relationship to the growth of media. That is, the more costly and constant the use of media in American political campaigns, the less positive information that is transmitted.

Today, it is hard to believe that there was at time when the average American voter would attend -- and relish -- a good three or four-hour political debate. Can anyone imagine the American electorate sitting still for a Lincoln-Douglas debate in 2006? And mind you, their debates took place without the aid of microphones or air conditioning! Today, what passes for political debate hardly deserves the name. We're all familiar with the setup: two, three, four or more candidates, all standing behind podia [some standing on phone books lest anyone have an obvious height advantage], being asked questions that have all the strength and substance of cotton candy. And then, instead of responding to what is asked, they take 45 of their 60 allotted seconds to

refute, negate or excoriate. This is the modern version of Lincoln-Douglas; the triumph of form over substance.

In speaking with people around the country, I find that more and more, the level of political discourse and understanding is fast approaching an alarming nadir.

"I wouldn't vote for candidate X for all the tea in China," one person says, "because he [or she] is a far-left-liberal."

"And how do you know that he [or she] is a Far left liberal?' And come to think of it, what *is* a 'Far-left-liberal?'"

"Well, a far-left-liberal is, of course, first of all, a Democrat, a Defeatocrat . . . you know, a *cut-and-run* type who would prefer to see Osama bin Laden here in Chicago [or Pittsburgh, or Tulsa or Miami] than in Iraq."

"Anything else?" I ask.

"Yeah, a left-liberal is in favor of raising taxes and expanding government, is against prayer and family values, and doesn't care about the pre-born."

"And how do you know all this about candidate X?" I ask.

"Well, I . . . I . . . " And here the conversation begins to wind down.

On the other side of the aisle, another person will insist that they wouldn't be caught dead voting for candidate Y because she [or he] is a "far-right wacko."

"And what's a 'Far-right wacko?'" I ask.

"That's, of course, a Republican, a person who wants to do away with Social Security, privatize Medicare, starve public education, and sell the entire country to Halliburton."

"And how do you know this?" I ask.

"Well, I . . . I . . . " and once again, the conversation winds down.

So where *did* our not-so-imaginary voters get their information? Why from the "other guy," that's where. Rarely these days, do I hear anyone give a *positive* reason for why they're going to be voting for candidate X or Y. More often, what we hear is a hazy justification for why they're going to be voting *against* the other guy. Is this any way to run a Democracy?

Are there any solutions running around in the old cerebral attic? Yes, I think there are.

- **Step one:** eliminate private money from all campaigns; go to 100% public financing which, contrary to popular belief, would add precious little to local, state or federal budgets.
- **Step two:** require candidates to participate in televised public forums in which Oxford Union-style debating would be the rule, not the exception.
- **Step three:** encourage common access carriers, as part of the price they pay for receiving their FCC licenses, to provide free airtime to candidates beginning no more than one month before primaries and general elections.

You know, in England, where election season is measured in weeks and months rather than in years, candidates *stand* for office. Here in America, our politicians *run*. To my way of thinking, this isn't some mere linguistic disparity such as "jail" versus "gaol" or "ta-ta" versus "see 'ya later." No, there is a world of difference. For when one "runs," they are in a different place from minute to minute, from second to second; when one "stands," everyone knows [at least in theory] where they are.

I for one would greatly prefer to know where candidates stand and what they stand for, rather than hearing what their opponents are running from. Anything short of this will merely continue that erosion which has dumbed down the American voting public to the point where we know the price of nearly everything, but the value of virtually nothing.

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October 20, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

October 27, 2006

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## Nowhere Man, Please Listen

Let's set Peabody's Wayback Machine for this week, back in 1965. Everybody strapped in and comfy? OK . . . Forward into the past. . .

Welcome to 1965. Looking around, you will note that this week:

- Better Davis, Danny Kaye and Yves St. Laurent were the Mystery Guests on "What's My Line."
- Dr. Franklin Edward Kameny led a protest march at the White House demanding equal rights for homosexuals [the term used back then].
- Bishops of the second Vatican Council ratified the Papal encyclical *Nostra Aetate*, which sought to teach about the relation of the Catholic Church to people who belong to other religious traditions -- most notably Jews.
- The 630-foot Gateway Arch was completed in St. Louis.
- Leo Durocher was named manager of the Chicago Cubs.
- John, Paul, George and Ringer recorded their classic "Nowhere Man" at the Abbey Road Studio.

This last item is of special interest. In retrospect, it would seem that the four lads from Liverpool were recording a piece not about John Lennon [the eponymous "Nowhere Man"], but rather about the vast majority of today's elected officials -- those who are "blind as [they] can be, just see what [they] want to see . . ." I mean, how many times have you heard the president, a

governor, senator or representative make comments that make you want to ask "Are you kidding? What planet are you living on?" Maddening, isn't it?

Truth to tell, there are a couple of obvious reasons why so many of our elected officials are so far out of touch with the lives, aspirations and concerns of the average citizen. First and foremost, the higher the office, the more intense the cocoon. Once elected, the emoluments and perquisites of office -- the dotting staffs, the elevators and subways that come at one's beck-and-call, the mother hen press secretaries, the go-to-the-head-of-the-line-no-waiting-necessary at airports and restaurants -- tend to transport most office holders out into Never Never Land. In a surrealistic plane where even a hiccup has gravitas, is it any wonder that so many believe [to paraphrase John Lennon] that the world is at their command?

President George W. Bush is a prime example of a political Nowhere Man. Whenever he leaves the White House, he is surrounded by a flying wedge of Secret Service Officers who whisk him into the Presidential limousine. Then, the five-to-ten car motorcade barrels its way through every red light in whatever town he happens to be, whisks him off to Airforce One, which then jets him to a press event, luncheon or dinner where he is surrounded only by those who think he walks on water. And if there are any protesters in the vicinity, they are consigned to an area as far out of visual range as is humanly possible -- preferably in another time zone.

Speaking from experience, I can tell you that it's all not that difficult to get "The Old Man" to just see what he wants to see. Back in 1969, I worked in a gubernatorial race out in California. Our candidate, the Speaker of the California State Assembly, had a campaign budget of just under \$1 million. Our opponent, incumbent governor Ronald Reagan, had more money than Rockefeller. Well, one day, with less than two weeks remaining, our candidate informs us that he wants to see his campaign posters plastered on every light pole, every bus bench, every available front lawn in the entire L.A. Basin -- an enormous geographic region. None of us had the guts or heart to tell him that

we simply did not have the time or funds to fulfill his order. What to do? We surely didn't want to let him down; our jobs depended on doing what he asked.

We pondered the matter for about an hour, then one fellow came up an idea. Calling the Speaker's driver, we obtained the precise route that the Old Man traveled every day from his home to campaign headquarters. Armed with this information, we proceeded to put his posters on every light pole, every bus bench and every available front lawn between Englewood and Wilshire Blvd. All this took less than two days to complete. On the third day, the Old Man entered campaign headquarters beaming from head to toe. "God bless you all," he roared, "you really came through. Now all Los Angeles has my posters!" What we had done, in essence, was make it possible for him to see just what he wanted to see.

You may recall that some years back during a presidential debate, a reporter asked the two candidates, "What's the average price of a quart of milk these days?" Neither candidate had the slightest idea. You had better believe that the next day, both candidates were armed with the price of milk in every major city in the United States, just in case the question ever made a comeback. It never did. The question, so basic in form, was totally brilliant in content, and pointed out in stark detail just how out of touch these Nowhere Men actually were . . . and to a very great extent, still are.

For the more than thirty years he served in elected office, former Florida Senator [and Governor] Bob Graham reserved one day a month for what he called "work-days." On these days, the senator would work sweeping up a barbershop, bagging at a grocery store, pumping gas at a service station -- you name it. And while he did manage to get a bit of positive press coverage for these activities, it served the higher, more honest purpose of keeping him in touch with the average citizen.

Frequently, we forget that these men and women work for us, and not the other way around. Unless and until we demand that they get off their high

perches and walk among the masses, they will continue to be "Nowhere Men," people who believe that the world is at their command.

Nowhere Men and Women, please listen . . .

*FYI: This is the 100th article to appear on this Blog since its inception. I want to thank you, the readers, who have been unstinting in your loyalty and honest with your comments. I couldn't do it without you. Let's look forward to the next hundred articles and pray that by the time we reach number 200, our title -- "Beating the Bushes" -- will be nothing more than a dusty anachronism . . .*

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October 27, 2006 in Political Opinion | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes

Taking America back from Bush, Rush, Rove, and the rest.

November 03, 2006

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## Memoria Longa, Vita Potentia Brevis

The Greek physician Hippocrates coined the aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis*, namely, "Art is long, but life is short. By this, he meant to teach that the art of healing has a much longer life expectancy than that of its practitioner -- and patient, we might well add. Needless to say, *ars longa, vita brevis* has generally been extended to all the arts today, and the principal intent, no matter how *ars* is interpreted, is to point out that we are all mortal and must anticipate death.

The same can be said in American politics. Were the good Greek physician alive and diagnosing today, he might well amend his immortal apothegm so as to state *memoria longa, vita potentia brevis* -- namely, "memory is long, but political life is short." For in this era of "Gotcha! Politics," one slip of the tongue, one youthful verbal indiscretion -- whether yesterday or yesteryear -- can spell *finis* or *calamitas* to even the brightest political career. Consider the following:

- In 1967, Michigan Governor George Romney was a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination. On September 7, 1967, Romney told Detroit television news reporter Lou Gordon that he had been "brainwashed" by American generals into supporting the Vietnam War effort while touring the area in 1965. That one word -- "brainwashed" -- caused such a furor among posturing Republican candidates that Romney's campaign died a swift death.

- In 1972, Maine Senator Edmund Muskie was a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination. One snowy winter morning, Muskie stood on the steps leading to the *Manchester Union Leader*, prepared to denounce publisher William Loeb, who had been running vicious articles and editorials denouncing both the senator and his wife Jane. Muskie began his remarks by calling the archconservative Loeb "a gutless coward." In defending his wife, Muskie broke down three times in as many minutes, uttered a few words, and then, with tears welling up in his eyes, stood mute. Those tears, broadcast on the nightly news, cost Muskie the nomination.
- On January 19, 2004, Vermont Governor Howard Dean finished a disappointing third in the Iowa Democratic caucuses. Addressing his downhearted supporters at a post-caucus rally, Dean attempted to energize them by giving a positive, stem-winding speech. Red of face and pumping a fist in the air, Dean killed all chances of political recovery by ending his oration with what has come to be known variously as "The Dean Scream," or the "I Have a Scream!" speech. Till this day, Dean detractors keep reminding American voters that the former Vermont Governor [and current Chair of the DNC] is "unbalanced," "maniacal," and "hyper."

These are but three examples of "*Gotcha!* Politics" at their worst. In essence, this smarmy tactic requires that one's opponents remain ever vigilant for an unfortunate word, phrase or gesture against which to can launch a frontal assault. It further requires that said word, phrase or gesture be referred to over and over and over, until, it moves from the realm of aberration to definition. In other words, Romney is understood to be mentally challenged, Muskie overly emotional, and Dean dangerously hyperkinetic. Indeed, *memoria longa, vita potentia brevis*.

One wonders how many Americans truly believe that Al Gore said he "invented the Internet," or remember that Virginia Senate candidate James

Webb said more than 30 years ago that he did not believe women should be admitted to Annapolis? Never mind that Gore did not claim to have invented cyberspace or that Webb, while serving as Ronald Reagan's Navy Secretary was directly responsible for enhancing and increasing the role of women in America's floating armada? If one listens to Webb's opponent, Senator George Allen [he who will ever after be referred to as "Senator Macaca"], one would have to conclude that he [Webb] is a card-carrying misogynist.

We may well be able to now add Senator John Kerry's name to the list of those who have fallen prey to "*Gotcha!* Politics." Who in America is unaware of the Senator's feeble -- and potentially self-mutilating gaffe this week out in California? What the humor-challenged gentleman from Massachusetts *was supposed* to say was: "Do you know where you end up if you don't study, if you're intellectually lazy? You end up getting us stuck in a war in Iraq. Just ask President Bush." Lamentably, what came out of Kerry's mouth wasn't what he speech writer had penned. So be it; John Kerry is no Jim Carrey. But tell me: is there anyone with an I.Q. higher than a house plant who really, truly believes that the senator was actually [not to mention, consciously] denigrating the fighting men and women in our nation's armed forces? Does anyone really, truly believe that Kerry, himself a thrice-wounded, highly decorated war hero would equate soldiering with failure? For anyone who believes that, I have a couple of hundred thousand shares of Enron for sale.

But wait: it would appear that there actually *are* folks out there with I.Q.s lower than a house plant. They are named Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove and North [Ollie, that is], among others. For no sooner did the words escape Kerry's lips than the White House was on the attack, weeping crocodile tears over the senator's "unforgivable attack" on America's fighting forces --an attack for which, the White House unctuously cried out, Kerry needed to do penance and self-flagellation. You have got to know that no one in the White House really believes that Kerry was out to denigrate our troops. Nonetheless, in accordance with our dictate *memoria longa, vita potentia brevis*, they wrung

their hands with glee, pasted on the mask of deadly seriousness, and professed utter revulsion.

Kerry's initial response, of course, was one of controlled anger. Anyone who watched his press conference without benefit of sound, would have seen a stolidly composed man addressing the press. His demeanor, however, belied his words, which were sharp, no-nonsense, and very, very angry. Watching that press conference, I thought "that's the Kerry we should have heard and seen back in 2004!"

One ironic and, I would imagine, unintentional byproduct of this flap is that at least for a double news-cycle, it forced the White House to return to the issue of Iraq -- something they had been showing themselves increasingly loathe to do. For this is the one issue upon which an overwhelming majority of the American public judges and defines both the Bush Administration and a whole lot of national Republicans now fighting for their political lives.

*Memoria longa, vita potentia brevis* is part and parcel of the oleaginous world of "Gotcha! Politics." As a partisan Democrat, I would hope and pray that Kerry's clinker fades from our collective memory, and that his stupidly botched joke won't do to him what tears did to Edmund Muskie. Sometimes we forget that our politicians are mere flesh-and-blood, men and women who, like us, make mistakes and [hopefully] live to see another day. They run for nomination; we should not expect them to be worthy of beatification.

The Republican's war in Iraq? Well, that's something that likely even old Doc Hippocrates couldn't cure . . .

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November 03, 2006 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 10, 2006

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## You Go Girl!

It is indeed lamentable that with the exception of hardcore political junkies, what most Americans know about the incoming leaders of the 110th Congress -- Pelosi, Hoyer, Conyers, Dingel, Rangel Waxman, Skelton, Emanuel, Levin *et al* comes from what their detractors have been saying about them during the recent campaign. To listen to O'Reilly, Limbaugh, Hannity, Coulter and the gang:

- Incoming Ways & Means Chair Charlie Rangel never met a tax hike he did not love.
- Incoming Government Reform Chair Henry Waxman wants to impeach President Bush.
- Incoming Judiciary Chair John Conyers is a Stalinist.
- Incoming House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer is far, far left, and
- Incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is a “Feminazi.”

Well guess again. While it is true that these honorable leaders-in-waiting are not nearly so conservative as the honorable ex-leaders-to-be, they are not even close to being the dangerous, vile, political carnivores they are made out to be. Again, what most Americans know of these -- and other -- incoming leaders in the House and Senate, they have learned largely from those who sought to damn them to political perdition.

Let us consider Speaker-designate Nancy Pelosi of California's 8th Congressional District [San Francisco]. To listen to the nattering negativists of the right:

- Mrs. Pelosi's position on the political spectrum rests somewhere between Stalin and Mao
- Her greatest joy will be in taxing the middle-class out of existence
- If she had her druthers, God would be banished from the U.S. of A.
- As a liberal Democrat she is undoubtedly on Osama's side
- She hates Israel.

Really! Can you imagine that? If she is so vile, so patently anti-American, how is it that voters in her district have been returning her to office for the past 20 years -- and with margins frequently approaching 85%? "Well what do you expect?" The negativists proclaim. "After all, her district *is* San Francisco. Need we say more?" Yes indeed. "More" definitely need be said.

So who is Nancy Pelosi?

Speaker-Designate Pelosi, who turned 66 last March, is a native of Baltimore. According to *The Almanac of American Politics*, "[Pelosi] has the energy and shrewdness of one who has handled the most delicate political chores, and the charm and unflappability of one who is the mother of five children." One of the most important things to know about her is that she is a D'Alesandro. To be a D'Alesandro in Baltimore is roughly equivalent to being a Kennedy in Boston, a Daily in Chicago, or a Long in Louisiana.

Mrs. Pelosi's father, Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr. [1903-1987] served in the House of Representatives from 1939-1947 and was mayor of Baltimore for 12 years after that. Her brother, Thomas D'Alesandro III, was mayor from 1967 to 1971. A 1962 graduate of Trinity College in Washington, D.C., Nancy D'Alesandro moved out to San Francisco, where she married Paul Pelosi, a highly successful businessman and raised their five children.

Following the 1987 death of Congresswoman Sala Burton -- who had taken over the seat from her deceased husband Phil -- Pelosi, who had been actively involved in Democratic Party affairs, was urged to run for the open seat. Once reaching Capitol Hill, she immediately addressed an issue of local sensitivity to her San Francisco constituents: the aftermath of the notorious Tienanmen Square massacre. Pelosi sponsored an amendment to give Chinese students the right to remain in the United States; President George H.W. Bush vetoed it. From that point on, Pelosi became [and remains] one of the most constant and articulate voices on the issue of human rights in China. In 1999, when then-President Clinton agreed to terms for China's entry into the World Trade Organization, Pelosi led an even more furious opposition to normal trade relations with China. At one point she claimed that Clinton was "either in denial or ill-informed about what's going on in China." Despite numerous setbacks, she has maintained her human rights vigils.

A representative with an almost perfect liberal voting record, Pelosi nonetheless has proved time and again that she is ready, willing and able to work with Republicans. In 2001, then-House Minority Whip David Bonior decided to give up his seat and run for Michigan governor. Spotting an opening, Pelosi ran for Bonior's post, defeating current Majority Leader in-waiting Steny Hoyer by a small margin. In that race she stressed the party's need to refocus on grassroots organization, money and message. One of her early supporters, Hawaii's Neil Abercrombie called her "a glamorous grandmother who knocks people off their feet."

As Minority Whip, Pelosi impressed her Democratic colleagues with her intelligence, gutsiness, and politesse. When Minority Leader Dick Gephardt announced his retirement from Congress, Pelosi jumped into the race with both feet, winning that post by the wide margin of 177-29. As House Minority Leader, she brought a burst of energy -- and favorable press coverage -- to a party that badly needed both. She also scored high marks with her colleagues for the way she selected members for House committee vacancies and

developing [despite what conservative pundits say] a coherent message highlighting the shortcomings of the Bush agenda.

One largely overlooked thread in the D'Alesandro-Pelosi saga deals with Jews, Judaism, and Israel. Nancy D'Alesandro Pelosi grew up in a largely Jewish neighborhood, attending, as she once recalled "nearly a bar or bat mitzvahs a week during my early teenage years." Unbeknownst to all but a small handful, there is actually a soccer field named after her family in the Haifa area.

The Pelosis have a Jewish son-in-law and two Jewish grandchildren. On the Speaker-Designate's 63rd birthday, she received a call from these grandchildren, who sang "Happy Birthday" to their grandmother in . . . Hebrew. As Mrs. Pelosi recalled, "that was my real birthday gift." Pelosi's support for Israel has been measured, intelligent and unstinting. On numerous occasions, she has been quoted as saying that "The creation of the modern state of Israel is the single greatest achievement of the Twentieth Century."

OK, so perhaps Nancy Pelosi -- the nation's first female [and first Italian] House Speaker, the person who will be third in line for the Presidency, isn't quite so bad as her detractors make her out to be. What sort of a Speaker will she make? How will she compare to say, Dennis Hastert or Newt Gingrich? Well, she *has* stated for the record that there will be absolutely no Presidential witch-hunts while she wields the House gavel. While she recognizes that some members of the Democratic Caucus may well wish to play "gotcha!" politics and look to impeach President George W. Bush, she has made it clear that there are far more important issues to consider; issues like raising the federal minimum wage, repealing the Medicare Drug Prescription boondoggle, moving the nation in the direction of energy independence, taking Global Warming very, very seriously, and creating a more intelligent policy in Iraq.

Will she succeed? At this point only God knows. One thing I do know however: Nancy Pelosi will steer a dynamic, rigorously transparent and intelligent course between the shoals of partisan politics and Presidential



veto. She will bring dignity, articulation and class back to a post that has been held for the past dozen years by a cheerleader and a coach. Do bear in mind that there will always be those who assume that they know everything there is to know about Speaker Pelosi, and don't like her . . . because she is a woman, because she is a "Stalinist Feminazi" or simply because she is from San Francisco.

Forget all about that claptrap Madam Speaker, and just do the kind of job we political junkies know you're capable of doing.

You go girl!

*Addendum: Please note that the subtitle at the top of this Blog has been changed from "Taking back the country from Bush, Rummy . . ." to simply "All Politics, All the Time." After Tuesday's electoral miracle, we figured that our alternatives were: engaging in an orgy of schadenfreude or merely changing the message. And so, we changed the subtitle . . .*

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November 10, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

*All Politics, All The Time*

November 17, 2006

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## What Do We Do Now?

In the 1972 Michael Ritchie/Jeremy Lerner movie "The Candidate," Robert Redford stars as Bill McKay, an idealistic young attorney who stages an improbable race for the United States Senate in his home state of California. Running against 4-term incumbent Crocker Jarmon [Don Porter -- who played the bemused dad in "Gidget"], Redford/McKay knows he hasn't a snowball's chance of victory. As a result, McKay refuses to knuckle under and play campaign politics-as-usual. As the film progresses, McKay emerges as a potent voice for the voiceless: "We can't play off black against old, young and poor. This country cannot house its homeless -- feed its foodless."

The lion's share of the film's 109 minutes is given over to watching the candidate's -- and the campaign's -- evolution. Against all odds, McKay's message begins to strike a resilient chord with the voters. He starts inching up in the polls, but still refuses to either mute or transform his idealistic, no-nonsense message. The movie reaches a dramatic denouement in its last minute when McKay's senior campaign staffers barge into his hotel room and inform their guy that they've won. The film's last shot is worth the price of admission: a wide-eyed, incredulous Redford/McKay stares directly into the camera and asks, "What do we do now?" Finis. Roll credits . . .

What makes "The Candidate" such a compelling -- and realistic -- film is precisely this last shot; the all-encompassing question "What do we do now?" In the real world of campaign politics candidates and staff experience total

immersion of months -- and sometimes years -- of nothing but fundraising, stump speeches, sleepless nights, and endless rounds of cold chicken, overcooked hotdogs and watery drinks in plastic cups. Running for office becomes one's career, one's passion, one's *raison d'etre*; what to do once victory is safely in hand? Well that, as we say in Yiddish, is another *geschichte* . . . another story.

The election of 2006 is [mostly] concluded. The Democratic Party dream of reclaiming both House and Senate has been accomplished. We are akin to Redford's McKay, sitting dazedly on the hotel bed, trying to assimilate the concept of victory, and asking "What do we do now?" For the better part of this election cycle, Republicans have been warning America that Democrats are the "Party of Cut-and-Run;" a motley crew of Godless liberals without a coherent message much less a plan for the future.

House Democrats, under the leadership of incoming Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Hoyer, have announced that the first 100 hours of the new 110th Congress will see a flurry of legislative activity; everything from raising the minimum wage and implementing all of the 9/11 Commission's proposals to fixing the Medicare prescription drug program [by negotiating lower drug prices]. cutting student loan interest rates in half, and promoting stem cell research. Do any of these proposals stand a chance of passage during the first 100 hours [let alone during the 110th Congress]? And if they do pass the House, will they also pass the Senate? And if they do pass both houses, what's to say that President Bush won't wield his nearly-unused veto pen? These are, of course, questions that no one can answer with any degree of certainty. What can be stated with precision, however, is that the first 100 hours are likely to see both a maelstrom of activity and a tectonic shift in attitude.

Yes I know, 100 hours is hardly more than a tick on the Congressional clock. Historically, the timer has been set to the Rooseveltian "First 100 days" -- that

incredible three-month period in early 1933 when a Democratically-reborn Congress instituted virtually the entire New Deal. 100 *days*, maybe. But 100 *hours*? What can anyone accomplish in just a mere four days? Plenty. Consider that in the next 100 hours:

- The top five oil companies will take in \$4.3 billion in profits.
- \$1.1 billion will be spent on the war in Iraq.
- The public debt will grow by \$4.9 billion.
- The top 10 pharmaceutical companies will gain \$2.6 billion in profits.
- The nation's top CEOs will earn an average of \$2 million each.

Then again, during the next 100 hours, a minimum wage worker working an eight-hour, five-day week will earn \$171.67 -- precisely .000085835% of what our CEOs can expect to find in their pay packets.

So what do we do now? **First** and foremost, it seems to me, "we" must begin the slow, arduous process of restoring confidence in the American political process. This entails opening the doors and windows of Capitol Hill and permitting the cleansing breeze of transparency to waft through its chambers. This means seeking an end to the divisive "win-at-all-costs" strategy employed by Republicans during the past dozen years.

**Second**, Democrats must make sure that the men and women of K Street are no longer a fourth coequal branch of government. The role played by K Street -- the nation's lobbyists -- in our most recent Congresses has been nothing short of scandalous; can you say Abramoff, Ney or DeLay? We must ensure that no longer will Congress enact legislation that clearly -- brazenly -- benefits only those already endowed with immeasurable wealth, untrammelled access and unfettered power.

**Third**, the new 110th Congress must reevaluate America's position in this world of ours. For too long, America has been acting like the most spoiled

child in the family of nations. We must redirect our wealth, our energies and our power toward making this world a better place for everyone -- not just for those who already have all they could ever need. One of the best things Congress can insist upon is that America open its ears and mind to those who deride and disparage us. To my way of thinking, dialogue beats the daylights out of aggression.

**Last**, and to the greatest, most politic extent possible, Congress must investigate this administration; not so much its personalities as its policies. It must seek answers to a long list of questions. Three of the most important will no doubt be:

- Did this administration mislead both Congress and the American public in order to fight a war that had precious little to do with terrorism?
- Has this administration excised more than 230 years of legal protections in an illegal and immoral manner?
- Has the federal treasury become nothing more than a welfare giveaway for a select group of the nation's wealthiest and most influential corporations and individuals?

It is safe to say that there will be plenty to keep the 110th Congress busy.

Ever since 1972, political junkies and movie fans alike have wondered if there will ever be a sequel to "The Candidate." What, we want to know, ever became of Bill McKay? Did he "go Washington," or did he remain just as forceful and idealistic as he was during his improbable campaign? Did his brand of disarming frankness catch on nationally, or was he a mere one-term fluke? I would like to think that he maintained his ideals, kept up his energy, and became an influence for good.

But most of all, I would pray that he inspired every man, woman, and child to ask that most important of all questions: *what do we do now?*

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 24, 2006

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## Hubris or Sophrosyne?

Back in 1530, a man named Fitzherbert published a tract on animal husbandry. Included amongst the long-forgotten author's nuggets of wisdom one finds: *"The dogge must lerne it when he is a whelp, or els it wyl not be; for it is harde to make an olde dogge to stoupe."* Simply translated, Fitzherbert's aphorism teaches, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Truer words were never written.

Just reference President George W. Bush.

"How so?" you may well ask. As the saying goes, *"Vell, I'll tell 'ya . . ."*

Within the span of just a little over two weeks President Bush has gone from the chastened to the *chutzpadik*; from the whupped to the warrior. Wasn't it just two-and-a-half weeks ago that W was proclaiming his deep desire to work with the new Democrat-controlled 110th Congress in a fresh mood of bipartisanship? Wasn't this the man who broke bread and took photos with Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid? Seems to me the answer is "Yes, it certainly was."

If this is so [and a million photo-ops had better not be wrong], why is W still whistling the divisive, conservative-to-the-core, take-no-prisoners tune of the victorious? Didn't he hear the blaring klaxon of the American voting public? Doesn't he realize that the results of November 7 past were a repudiation; a notice of intent to file for a mid-term course correction?

Not at all.

For in Bush's [and by extension, the Republican's] case, the perceived wisdom is not merely that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Rather, it's *qui me amat, amat et canem meum*; namely, "love me, love my dog."

One might think that instead of acting *hubristically* [which we will herein define as "with unmerited swagger"], he would consider cloaking his deeds in a mantle of *sophrosyne* -- that is, "moderation," "discretion," or "prudence."

One might think.

But one would be wrong; terribly, overwhelmingly wrong.

But then, what can one expect from a man who chose to treat his 2000 victory by-judicial-fiat as an overwhelming mandate, and then squandered nearly all his post-9/11 political capital on an ill-conceived war-by-choice? Moderation? Discretion? Prudence? Wake up; this is the man who when asked to name just one mistake he had made as president, was stuck for an answer. Moral certainty, so the philosophers tell us, is the most fertile breeding ground for *hubris*.

Just a scant two-and-a-half weeks after W's stated desire to work in that spirit of bipartisanship, he is back to his old *uber*-partisan tricks:

- He still wants [expects?] the Senate to confirm the cowboy diplomatist John Bolton as our permanent United Nations ambassador; something a Republican-controlled Senate refused to do. The chances of this happening are two: absolutely none and even less than that.
- He has renominated a slew of hard-right judicial candidates who were already rejected by a user-friendly Senate for being too conservative and grossly unqualified. Senator Charles E. Schumer, a key Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee has already pronounced them all politically DOA. "The days of hard-right judges are over," Schumer bluntly stated last week.



- The president has nominated Andrew Biggs, an advocate of privatizing Social Security, to a six-year term as the next deputy commissioner of Social Security. At the same time, Bush has assigned Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson to work with members of the 110th Congress to build consensus on what to do with the program. Can you say "working both ends against the middle?"
- Bush has appointed a new chief of family-planning programs who is opposed to contraceptives for women. Believe it or not, this is the fellow who will be advising the Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] on reproductive health and adolescent pregnancy!

What is going on here? Is the president so devoted to making America safe for the Religious Right that he fails to grasp an undeniable fact: that approximately one-third of all self-defined Evangelical Christians voted for Democrats this time around? Is he so politically tone-deaf that Karl Rove's discordance still sounds like sweet four-part harmony? In short, is this man capable of understanding that from this point on, he is in for some serious challenges?

George W. Bush might well take a lesson from California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the head honcho of *hubris*. For recent history records that after having been handed his political lunch by the voters of the Golden State, Conan the Republican rethought his positions, apologized for his political ineptitude, and resolved to become a team player. His stunning about-face carried with it a stunning reward: Schwarzenegger won an overwhelming victory [56%-39%] over California State Treasurer Phil Angelides.

Not that George W. Bush will ever run for office again. However, if he is to have any hope of scoring higher than Warren G. Harding on the list of America's worst presidents; if he wants to be remembered for something other than being the man who bemired America in Iraq and then single-handedly made the term

"compassionate conservative" a hackneyed punchline, he will have to rethink and reevaluate.

Will he be a cowboy or a conciliator?

Will he swagger alone or stride in harmony?

In short Mr. President, what will it be? *Hubris* or *Sophrosyne*?

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November 24, 2006 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

*All Politics, All The Time*

*December 01, 2006*

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## The Earth is the Lord's . . .

According to an ancient tale, a sweet, simple peasant was once summoned before the lord of a vast estate. The master, a kind, yet capricious sort informed the peasant that he was going to make him a deal:

"If you can answer three questions to my satisfaction, I will permit you and your family to live on my estate rent free forever more." The peasant's eyes widened in fear and anticipation.

"And if I don't answer the questions to your satisfaction," the elderly serf asked nervously, "what then, my lord?"

Pondering the worker's question a few moments, the lord said, "I hadn't given that too much thought, although I'd probably be of a mind to kick you and your family off my estate." The peasant swallowed hard.

"What are your questions?" the old man asked, fearing the worst.

"The first question is," the lord of the manor said, holding up one finger, what's *the fastest thing in the world*? Number two: what's *the biggest thing in the world*, and number three, *what's*

*the best thing in the world?"* The peasant began visibly shaking with fear. The lord awaited the old man's answer.

"Well?" the portly landowner finally asked, "what are your answers?"

In a quavering voice, the old serf began: "I would have to say that the *fastest* thing in the world is an idea." He closed his eyes, anticipating the worst.

"MARVELOUS!" roared the lord of the manor. "Not quite the answer I had in mind, but utterly brilliant!" The peasant felt a bit less apprehensive.

"And what is the biggest thing in the world?" the well-fed master asked.

In a slightly stronger, slightly less shaky tone, the elderly peon stammered: "the biggest thing in the world is . . . is . . . the earth!" The lord of the manor was dumbstruck by the peasant's response.

"ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT!" the portly man shouted, banging his fist on the table before him. "And now for question number three. What is the *best* thing in the world . . . .?"

Permit us to hold off the peasant's final answer for a few paragraphs.

Although at the time of its original telling, the peasant would not have known about what today we call "the universe," his answer was, nonetheless, right on the money. There *is* nothing larger in this world of ours than planet earth. And, by extension,

there is no more prominent, more critically universal issue than the health of the very planet that houses, nourishes and sustains us all. To our way of thinking, this is an issue -- THE issue -- that should transcend both border and language, economic philosophy and theologic scruple. Seems like a no-brainer, doesn't it?

And yet, unbelievably, there are still those in positions of power and influence who refuse to admit -- at least publicly -- that global warming *is* an issue of monumental, earth shattering [no pun intended] importance. Case in point, the Christian Coalition of America.

Just this week, the leadership of the Coalition announced that the Rev. Joel C. Hunter [senior pastor of North Church, Longwood, Florida] will not, as previously announced, be taking over the reins of the once-powerful evangelical organization.

The reason? Why the good Rev. Hunter has, over the past several years actually been urging the Coalition to expand its conservative political agenda from issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage to include fighting both poverty fighting global warming. On the second issue -- global warming -- what could be more obvious? What could be more religious? After all, didn't the psalmist sing "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof?"

And yet, according to Hunter, the Coalition's leadership informed him that "this [i.e. the twin issues of poverty and global warming] just isn't for us. It won't speak to our base, so we just can't go there."

"Can't go there"? "Won't speak to the base?" What in the world does *that* mean? How in the name of all that is demonstrably holy can anyone with an ounce of religious [let alone human] scruple turn their back on God's good earth? Where is the justification or rationale for such bald-faced irreligiosity? How can those whose love of -- and total submission to -- the Lord is broadcast by tens of millions of watts over hundreds and hundreds of stations turn their backs on the very earth that God has created?

Yes indeed, how?

One path on the road to understanding the illogic of loving God and then turning one's back on the Works of Creation is paved with the stumbling blocks of linguistic interpretation. In Genesis 1:28, we find God blessing Adam and Eve and saying to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing . . ." Many evangelicals understand this to mean that God has specifically granted humankind the right to do with the earth, its environment and creatures as we see fit; to "subdue" and exercise "dominion" over it. However, that is not what the original Hebrew text states. The word that many translate as "subdue it" -- *vikhibshuha* in Hebrew -- actually commands humanity to exercise "mastery" or "stewardship" over all that God has created. Quite a different kettle of fish. Then too, the Hebrew word *u'redu* does not mean "and have dominion." According to

the *midrash* -- ancient rabbinic commentary -- what God is telling man is that if he/she does not exercise sensitive, thoughtful care in dealing with all the works of creation [*u'redu*], then he/she will descend [*yerdu*] and lose preeminence. Perhaps that is why we are in the throes of global warming; we have *not* exercised proper stewardship.

Linguistics aside, the answer to our question -- how can the Godly turn their backs on God's creation? -- may well lie in the realm of theology. According to Randall Balmer, professor of American religious history at Barnard College, Columbia University and a visiting professor at Yale University Divinity School, a vast preponderance of evangelical Christians subscribe to a theologic principle called *dispensational premillennialism*. In his most recent book, the courageously written *Thy Kingdom Come: An Evangelical's Lament*, Balmer notes that dispensationalism has given to far too many evangelicals an excuse, a rationale, for turning away from issues like Global Warming and actually exploiting all that God has created: "The rationale," Balmer writes, "[goes] something like this: Since Jesus is coming back to earth at any moment, why concern yourself with water quality or the ozone layer when the apocalyptic return of Jesus to usher in a new world will render any such worries irrelevant?"

For whatever reason, a vast preponderance of evangelical Christians [including the one who resides at 1600 Pennsylvania

Avenue] have seen fit to understand their role as masters over, not as servants of, the natural world. For far too many, "moral issues" begin with opposition to abortion and stem-cell research and end with opposition to gay rights of any sort. Although we are by no means experts in the Christian Bible, it seems that Jesus was far, far more concerned with poverty, peace and the love of God's creations than with abortion, homosexuality or the inheritance tax. . .

But there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. The Rev. Hunter is not alone. Increasingly, more and more evangelical Christians are coming to understand that loving God does require one to become actively involved in preserving and protecting all we have been given. To do otherwise, is sheer nightmare.

Returning to our story:

"Well, the feudal lord asked, becoming impatient. "What is your answer to my third question . . . namely, 'what is the best thing in the world?'"

Looking toward the heavens as if to garner Divine strength, the simple man whispered, "a good night's sleep."

May we all get a good night's sleep, a sleep unencumbered by nightmares caused by our own follies.

Stewardship, not dominance.



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December 01, 2006 in Politics and Religion | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 08, 2006

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## They Actually Let These Guys Drive?

Quick now, what is the hottest topic for right-wing talking heads this past week? What is it that has Hannity, Prager Savage and Co. frothing with righteous indignation and dire warnings of doom? The Baker-Hamilton report? Global warming? The fast-approaching ascendancy of Pelosi, Hoyer, Rangel and Boxer to positions of leadership? The precipitous decline of the Miami Hurricane's football team?

Not even close. That which has their knickers in a collective twist is incoming Minnesota Democrat Keith Ellison.

Ellison, as you may know, is the first Muslim ever elected to the United States Congress. He won in a landslide, capturing 56% of the vote in Minnesota's Fifth Congressional District, which had been represented for nearly 30 years by the retiring Martin Olav Sabo. Several days ago, Ellison quietly announced that at the ceremonial photo-op following his official swearing-in, he will be placing his right hand on a copy of the Koran. And while the flashbulbs pop, he, like all the other new members of the House and Senate will be shown swearing to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.

So where's the news? What's causing all the outrage and dire "sky-is-falling" predictions of the Cassandras of the radio right? Didn't you know? Don't you understand and realize? In being photographed swearing to uphold the Constitution while holding fast to a copy of the Koran, Ellison is actually sending a message of encouragement to every Muslim fanatic from Canada to Kashmir.

Please do understand that your leg is being pulled. Or is it?

According to what we've heard and seen in the past several days, Hannity, Prager, Savage & Co. really, truly believe that that's what Ellison's swearing-in will do; provide aid, comfort and encouragement to America's Islamic enemies. Incredible, no? They actually let these guys drive cars and live in rooms without padded walls?

To my way of thinking, Keith Ellison's election shows what's best about America; that we are a country, a society, that despite its human flaws, can occasionally see beyond labels and identify the genuine good in others -- regardless of their race or religion. For what is it that Keith Ellison -- an African-American-Catholic-turned-Muslim campaigned on? What were his promises? What did he tell voters of Minnesota's Fifth District about himself, his aims, priorities, and guiding principles?

In his campaign literature, Keith Ellison wrote:

*"As a young man I was outraged and frustrated by the racism and injustice I saw in my community and the world around me. Those experiences propelled me to become a social activist, using my words and actions to draw attention to the very serious problems of inequality, racial injustice and poverty in our society."*

*"As I matured, I had to confront my anger and face it down. I eventually realized that it is easy to be a critic pointing out problems and fails, but it is a far more difficult thing to be part of creating the solution."*

*"As my father used to say, 'Any jackass can kick a barn down; it takes a carpenter to build it back up.'"*

*"Eventually I understood what my father had been telling me, and I committed to being one of the carpenters. I began to help create a world where everybody counts and where there are no throwaway people."*

*"People draw strength and moral courage from a variety of religious traditions. Mine have come from both Catholicism and Islam. I was raised Catholic and later became a Muslim while attending Wayne State University. I am inspired by the Qur'an's message of an encompassing divine love, and a deep faith guides my life every day."*

*"I believe in a value system that invests in people and asks citizens to work for the common good. I decided to run for office because I believe our government has a positive role to play in creating a better future for all people."*

*"We need leaders who are committed to peace, a clean and sustainable environment, strong public schools and a health care system that works for all people."*

Sounds pretty good to me. . .

And yet, because he is a Muslim and because he is going to take his oath while holding the Koran, the self-appointed guardians of patriotism and American values have sounded the klaxon warning us of impending doom.

According to commentator Dennis Prager, Ellison's decision to hold that Koran *"will embolden Islamic extremists and make new ones, and they'll see it as the first sign and realization of a greater goal, which is making Islam the religion of America."*

In a December 5th op-ed piece, Prager lamented that *"neither I nor tens of millions of other Americans will watch in silence as the Bible is replaced with another religious text for the first time since George Washington brought a Bible to his swearing-in."*

Wrong. According to the Library of Congress, Presidents Franklin Pierce, Rutherford B. Hayes, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover and Lyndon Johnson were inaugurated without benefit of a Holy Bible. And Justice Arthur Goldberg was installed while holding on to a copy of the Hebrew Bible. When reminded of this latter fact on a recent television show, Prager responded "Justice Goldberg used the Old Testament, which is part of the American Bible."

The *American Bible*? What in the name of Moses is the *American Bible*? Wasn't it written a few years before Lexington and Concord?

Rabid radio talk-show host Michael Savage asked *"What's next? A witch gets elected, and she says she's only going to be sworn in with her hand on a pentagram?"*

For this bit of lunacy, Keith Olbermann awarded Savage his "Worst Person in the World" award.

Not to be outdone by Prager or Savage, Sean Hannity asked if *"those of you defending this congressman's decision and his right to choose his favorite book, you know, would you have allowed him to choose, you know, Hitler's Mein Kampf, which is the Nazi Bible? In other words, where does this stop? Is there any limitations whatsoever? Does anybody get any choice they want?"*

Yes Sean, they do. This is America. It's our diversity that makes us unique. Remember that old expression *e pluribus unum*? It means "out of many comes one.

But don't worry Sean. Never fear Dennis or Michael; no one elected to Congress is likely going to be placing their hand on a copy of *Mein Kampf*, a pentagram, *Dianetics*, or even Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

How do I know this? I don't. Not for a solid fact. But what I do know is that the American public has far more sense than the three of you, and can more often than not see through Nazis, witches, warlocks and things that go bump in the night.

Meanwhile, I'm still fascinated. Do they actually let guys like you drive? And if so, why?

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 15, 2006

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## Revisionist History 101

Do you have any idea what two things Pharaonic Egypt, ancient Assyria, Imperial Spain, Tsarist Russia and the Third Reich have in common?

First, all four tried to destroy the Jewish people. Second, none of them exist anymore except in dusty history books. In other words, they are all extinct.

Is there a causal connection here?

Sadly, humankind's all but psychotic loathing of Jews and the historic Jewish claim on the land of Israel seems as old as the people itself. One might well ask "What came first: Jews or anti-Semitism?" For more than three millennia, the Children of Israel have been mocked, scorned and murdered; sentenced to death by hanging, stoning, drowning, gassing and fire; accused of being both subhuman and members of a superhuman international cabal; stigmatized as Christ-killers and blamed for everything from medieval plagues to the the Wall Street Crash of 1929. And yet, despite the murderous intentions of so many, as the Yiddish expression goes, *mir zynin doh* . . . "We're still here."

Unquestionably, there are still those who believe that Jews are the ultimate key for understanding the world's most vexing problems -- whether they be in the realm of the political, the economic or the sociocultural. To those who devote themselves to an even elementary study of world history, such fury, fear and hatred is beyond the pale of comprehension. How can a people who make up barely two percent of the world's population be so powerful, so diabolical, so incredibly malevolent? How can the modern State of Israel, a tiny country comprising but 8,367 square miles [290 miles long and a mere 85 miles at its widest point] and approximately 7 million people [of whom 76.2% are Jews] be such a threat to the entire globe?

The answer is simple: they cannot, are not, and never shall be. Neither Israel nor the Jewish people are a threat to anyone; not a threat, not a stumbling block, and of a certainty, *not* the cause of the world's problems. What Israel and the Jewish people *are* and what, in the nightmarish ranting of delusional minds they *represent* -- well, that's another story.

This past week, the twin specters of Holocaust-denial and "Israel-as-the-ultimate-source-of-all-tension-in-the-Middle-East" came strolling along hand-in-hand onto the stage of international consciousness. The one twin appeared in Tehran in the guise of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust;" the other was the publication of former President Jimmy Carter's

screed, *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid*. That these two revisionist canards should still be drawing breath is but one more proof that Santayana was absolutely right: "Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them."

Our purpose here is not to prove the terribly obvious -- that the Nazis really did exterminate six million Jews or that the State of Israel does not practice apartheid. To do so would be to insult the reader's intelligence. No, our purpose is to point out the sad state of affairs into which much of the world has fallen.

One can perhaps understand [if not forgive] Ahmadinejad's noxious gathering of so-called scholars; after all, the man's psychopathology is such, that were Sigmund Freud still alive, he would have to charge the man triple overtime. This gathering included such infamous anti-Semites as:

- Former Louisiana legislator and KKK leader David Duke,
- French writer Georges Thiel, who has been convicted of questioning the Holocaust in France,
- Frederick Toben of Australia, who was imprisoned for three months in Germany back in 1999 for Holocaust revisionism,
- Discredited French academic Robert Faurisson, and
- Six members of "Jews United Against Zionism" [a group no doubt affiliated with the notoriously right-wing *Neturei Karta*].



The conference's aim, according to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, was "not to deny or prove the Holocaust," but rather to create opportunities "for suitable scientific research so that the hidden and unhidden angles of this most important political issue of the 20th century becomes more transparent."

"Transparent?" To our way of thinking, "transparent" is just another word for "historical revisionism" -- the willful rewriting of history to serve preconceived notions that in turn bolster an obvious political agenda. When all else fails, when the fabric of one's society is coming apart at the seams, when the masses are beginning to question a government's legitimacy, rewrite history and blame it on the Jews.

To even discuss whether or not the most closely-documented act of bestiality in all human history has any validity is beyond the egregious; it is an abomination fully as abhorrent as the Holocaust itself. And yet, despite its very absurdity, it still carries a very real and evocative power for those who need a historic scapegoat -- an object of scorn, ridicule and obloquy.

Closer to home, we have the recent publication of Jimmy Carter's latest book, *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid*. One need go no further than the book's dust jacket to understand the former President's point of view: "A system of apartheid, with two peoples occupying the same land but completely separated

*from each other, with Israelis totally dominant and suppressing violence by depriving Palestinians of their basic human rights."*

Although there is room enough to condemn President Carter's skewed version of the current reality, one should not be terribly surprised by it. He has been terribly critical of Israel for many years. And despite the fact that near the end of the book, Carter actually acknowledges that what is going on in Israel today is *"unlike that in South Africa [i.e. apartheid] -- not racism, but the acquisition of land,"* he fails to explain that the reason why Israel continues to hold on to lands it captured in a licit defensive war is the prevention of terrorism. Anyone who has kept abreast of events in Israel/Palestine over the past generation will know that Israel has tried, on numerous occasions, to exchange land for peace. And what did they get in return? In the words of Professor Alan Dershowitz: *"terrorism, rockets and kidnappings launched from the returned land."*

Again, our purpose is not to regurgitate the more obvious facts of Israeli history or the most egregious distortions of it as understood by much of the "civilized" world. Rather, it is to recognize both Ahmadinejad's conference of Holocaust deniers and Carter's beacon to the willfully blind for what they are: studied exercises in revisionist history that in the long run, will impede humankind's ability to progress toward the goal of true international comity and peace.

During the earliest days of the Holocaust, a bit of gallows humor made its way through the streets of Berlin:

One day, Otto and Fritz meet on the street. During conversation, Otto asks Fritz: "Why are we having so many problems here in Germany? Why is inflation so high, morals so low, and nothing making sense anymore?"

Answered Fritz: "There are precisely two causes for all our difficulties."

"And they are?" Otto inquired of Fritz.

"The bicycle riders and the Jews."

"What in the world do the bicycle riders have to do with all our problems?" Otto asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," answered Fritz. "What do the Jews have to do with our problems?"

Anybody got an answer?

## **Beating the Bushes:**

*All Politics, All The Time*

**December 21, 2006**

### **Which Old Wish?**

We Jews have an old Yiddish chestnut -- a wish for each other, if you will: *ah hundret uhn tzvawhnzik*. Roughly translated, it means "May you live to be one-hundred-and-twenty." Why 120? Because that's the age at which Moses, the greatest of all Jewish prophets, shuffled off this mortal coil.

Now, does the person expressing this desire really and truly hope or believe that their friend, mate or child will reach the fabled 6-score years? Highly unlikely; especially when one takes into account the high cost of healthcare and the coming insolvency of Social Security. Nonetheless, despite the very improbability of anyone living to such advanced age, we Jews still retain a peculiar fondness for our hoary-headed colloquialism. It continues to be a popular toast, ranking a somewhat distant second to the more ubiquitous *l'chaim!* -- "To life!" -- and a bit ahead of *Mazal tov!* -- roughly, "Congratulations!"

It's unlikely that a Jew would say *ah hundret uhn tzvawhnzik* to a non-Jew. And not because we wish our Gentile neighbors a

shorter life. God forbid. No, we don't generally verbalize this wish to our Gentile friends or neighbors, because, truth to tell, not too many non-Jews understand Yiddish or can relate to its context. It's sort of like a Gentile wishing "Merry Christmas" to a Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Jain.

This holiday shopping season, we have been witness to what, in my humble opinion, is the very definition of a tempest in a teapot: the propriety of merchants wishing their customers "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas." One would think that the season of "Peace on earth, goodwill toward all" [to be non-sexist] is just about the worst time for America to be divided into warring factions. And over what? Over which old wish the good folks at Wal-mart, K-Mart, Pets-Mart and all the other Marts greet their customers? To my way of thinking, this easily falls into the "get a life" category.

Now mind you, I am in no way denigrating, disparaging or denying the sensibilities of Christians and those who celebrate Christmas. I think Christmas is a wonderful, potentially meaningful religious observance -- for Christians. And although I don't quite fathom how and why Christmas [and yes, Chanukah] has come to mean "spend more than you can comfortably afford," I nonetheless greatly respect all those for whom this is the season for "tidings of comfort and joy." But to keep a

watchlist of those merchants who are "naughty" and those who are "nice?" To develop a website dedicated to warning shoppers away from those businesses that persist in using the more generic "Happy Holidays?" Whatever happened to nobility and civility?

Back in 1919, in an essay entitled *Hamlet and His Problems*, writer [and devote Catholic] T.S. Eliot popularized the term "objective correlative." In terms of his essay, Eliot was attempting to describe or encapsulate how art could best express emotion. In Eliot's words, *The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative,' in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, which shall be the formula for that particular emotion.* For those who might be reading Eliot's definition twice or thrice without comprehension, let's restate it in as few words as possible: an *objective correlative* is, simply stated, too much emotion for too little cause. And that, it would seem to me, is precisely what we are witnessing in the present debate over "Merry Christmas" versus "Happy Holidays."

To mandate that employees wish a "Merry Christmas" to customers makes the very wish, by definition, less than honest, less than meaningful. To mandate that employees greet each and every customer with the same wish -- "Merry Christmas" -- presupposes that each and every customer celebrates that holiday. In an increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-

religious America, this is a wrongheaded presupposition. It also misses the "reason for the season" by a clear country mile.

To my way of thinking, Christmas and Chanukah -- along with Kwanzaa and all other celebrations held at or near the Winter Solstice -- are deeply meaningful, and as such, deserving of a far far greater degree of respect than the current tissue-thin debate implies. Whether one is celebrating the birth of Jesus, the miraculous defeat of Greco-Assyrians by the ancient Hasmoneans [Maccabees] or the *Nguzo Saba* [the Seven Guiding Principles], one is, ideally, engaged in a religio-ethical rite that finds far, far greater meaning in one's home or house of worship than it does at Wal-Mart, Circuit City or the Seattle International Airport.

Yes, there *are* more Christians than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists or Jains in America. And yes, their purchasing power is therefore, by definition, far greater. Being part of a large majority certainly does have its advantages. It also carries one distinct *disadvantage*: of understanding what it means to be part of a minority. It never ceases to amaze me just how beleaguered and trod upon majorities can be made to feel. To listen to talk radio or watch screaming TV, one would think that here in America, Christianity was in danger of being outlawed or condemned to perdition. Well, I've got good news: it is not. Christianity is alive and well; just as are Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and the rest.

The key, it seems to me, is to show far more respect for our various religious traditions by keeping them alive in our home and houses of worship; not in the malls of merchandise. And for those who persist in arguing over whether Wal-Mart employees should say "Merry Christmas" rather than "Happy Holidays;" to those who continue believing that Christmas is as American as mom, apple pie and lay-away plans, I say this:

- Merry Christmas
- Happy Chanukah
- A joyous, meaningful Kwanzaa
- *A hundret uhn tzvawnzik*, and
- *L'chaim!*



# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

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December 28, 2006

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## Like Kinda', Sorta', You Know?

English is an amazingly adaptive language. Without knowing it, any reasonably articulate speaker has within his or her vocabulary, hundreds of words that find their origin in languages many have never even heard of.

A brief sampling:

- **Jaguar:** From **Guarani**, one of major languages of Paraguay.
- **Petunia, tapioca:** From **Tupi**, a language group found in South America.
- **Shaman:** From **Tungus**, spoken by nomadic Mongolians in Eastern Siberia.
- **Almanac, mattress, admiral:** From **Arabic**.
- **Zebra:** From **Kikongo**, a language spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and
- **Atoll:** From **Maldivian**, a tongue found in the Maldives, an island nation in the Indian Ocean.

English is also an ever-changing language. Consider the number of slang terms we have used over past decades to describe something that is great:

"Keen," "far-out," "cool," "nifty," "bitchin," "outa' sight," "rad," "hip," "groovy," "bad," "gnarly," "neato-Keeno," "far-effing-out," "un-effing-believable," "super-duper," "slick," "stud," and the up-to-the-minute in-term, "the bomb." In order to be current with the language, of course, one had best not be heard to utter the word "bitchin," in 2006, lest they be considered a linguistic dinosaur -- or, even worse, a "nerd," "geek," "putz," "square," "toast," "wonk," or the youngest generation's current fav, a "homo."

Over the past several years, I've noted an alarming "dumbing-down" of the language used to such magnificent advantage by the likes of Shakespeare, Dickens, Twain, Faulkner, Chandler, Ferber and Welty. How so? When was the last time you heard a complete sentence without the word "like?" How many times can we use "'ya know?" in a single verbal communication? What purpose do the delimiting "kinda" and "sorta" serve? And how often do we hear a sentence begin with the word "well . . .?"

Let's begin with the word *well*. Miss Collette, my fourth-grade English marm, used to keep a rather large wooden-handled bell on her desk. Anytime a student would begin a sentence with "Well . . .," she should pick up that bell and clang the offending student into embarrassed silence. Even after nearly a half-

century, I can still hear Miss Collette's "Well-Bell" clanging in my ears. According to Miss Collette," beginning a sentence with "Well . . . , " told the listener that the speaker likely didn't have any idea of what he was going to say. "This is not the proper way that a lady or gentleman begins a sentence," she said matter of factly more than a thousand times. Hearing her clanging that "Well-Bell" was a sure-fire cure.

Let's move on to the two qualifying terms *kinda'* and *sorta'*. Whenever one uses either of these words in conversation, it means, essentially, that the speaker is not truly willing to commit to a declarative judgment. "How's that?" you ask. [*At this point I'm stifling a natural urge to begin my explanation with "Well . . . ."*] Take, as an example the following: "I kinda' [or sorta'] think she's wrong." Kinda' think? Either you do or you don't think she's wrong. To preface the statement with *kinda'*, makes whatever follows less than compelling; as if the speaker, not wishing to commit him or herself to an iron-clad opinion, has left the door open just a crack.

Next, we come to *You know?* The next time you hear an athlete interviewed, start counting the number of times he or she uses 'Ya know? I guarantee that you'll run out of fingers and toes before the interview reaches the half-way point. Again, we return to the late Mrs. Collette. Whenever one of her charges would utter 'Ya know?' she would hold up her hand like a school crossing guard and state flatly, "but I *don't* know." Over the

course of time she convinced us that when one repeatedly uses the offending term, it betrayed a certain mindlessness on the part of the speaker. "Remember," she would say, "listeners *want* to know what you are telling them. If you've already decided in advance that they know what you're saying, it's probably better to remain quiet." Pretty good advice, 'ya know?

Lastly, we come to my number one linguistic bugbear: *like*. If you are ever of a mind to count the number of times a person uses *like* in a sentence or paragraph, you'd probably best have on loan the fingers and toes of your five best friends, because as sure as God made little green apples, you're going to hear it a couple of dozen times.

To my way of thinking, *like* has but two meanings: "similar to," and something in the neighborhood of "admire." Incorrect uses of the term abound: "She asked me to drive her to the mall, and I'm like really upset." "When he told me how much it would cost, I'm like 'are you kidding?'" "They're like, out of their minds," 'ya know?"

A corollary to *like* is the even more egregious *I go*. I haven't the faintest idea from whence this bastardization of the language comes. Often, we hear something like [used here in its proper sense], "He told me that he has two tickets at center court for tonight's game and *I go* 'you've gotta be kidding me.'" Or, "I asked her what she thinks of Senator Clinton, and *she goes*, 'I kinda' like her.'" Ugh!

I do admit to being somewhat of a linguistic snob and purist. For that I no doubt have Miss. Collette to either credit or blame. Nonetheless, it seems to me that with each passing year, we are sounding more and more like the late lamented Maynard G. Krebs.

As the Bard of Avon would have it, we should speak the language *honorificabilitudinitatibus* -- "with honorableness."

'Ya know?

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December 28, 2006 in On Language | [Permalink](#)