

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

January 05, 2007

The Future is Now

As I write this piece, the new Pelosi/Reid-led 110th Congress is less than 24 hours old. And despite the fact that the baby has hardly drawn its first breath, the conservative Cassandras of the Fourth Estate are already doing what they do best: vilifying, characterizing and engaging in *argumenta ad homines* [and, to coin a neologism *ad feminas*] of the most egregious kind. Within a single news cycle, much sighing and gnashing of teeth has been heard -- and no doubt, the best [or worst] is yet to come.

Already, Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Reid and their Democratic colleagues are being accused of shutting the Republicans out of any meaningful participation in the day-to-day functioning of Congress; that contrary to their campaign promises of openness and transparency, they are already engaging in ham-handed tactics that will no doubt bring about presidential vetoes at best, the utter downfall of democracy at worst. And who said Chicken Little was merely a child's fable? I tell you he [or she] is alive and well and residing deep within our public midst.

We have already been reminded *ad nauseum* that:

- Speaker Pelosi is a San Francisco liberal [whatever that means]
- That Majority Leader Reid is weak-kneed
- That Incoming House Ways-and-Means Chair Charlie Rangel sounds like a demonic frog
- That Incoming Senate Judiciary Chair Patrick Leahy is a baby-killer
- That Incoming House Judiciary Chair John Conyers is a hopeless impeachment addict
- That Incoming House Government Reform Committee Chair Henry Waxman suffers from terminally incurable "subpoena envy," and that
- Incoming House Intelligence Committee Chair Sylvester Reyes doesn't know whether the majority of Iraqis are *Shia* or *Sunni*. [They are *Shia*].

What is conveniently overlooked, of course, is that Mrs. Pelosi has scotched Mr. Conyers' desire to impeach; has directed Mr. Waxman to investigate Republican programs and policies, not people; and has set a political agenda that is more doably moderate than demoniacally murderous. And while it is true that the Democrats of the 110th Congress will likely push for stem cell research, ask hard questions about our endless, rudderless war in Iraq, attempt to ferret out just who is making financial killings out of all the mayhem, and seek to undo some of the Republican's most immoral high-end tax cuts, they clearly aren't about to

knock the wheels off of our glorious republic.

Being a partisan optimist, I believe that the Democratically-controlled 110th Congress can and will make a difference. I've got to believe that they will raise the minimum wage, lower student loan repayment rates, take a long, hard look at the president's monstrous Medicare Drug Plan initiative, and go on record as believing that Global Warming is, as my daughter Nurit and her friends would say, "fer real."

To those who fear the worst -- that the Democrats will make abortion freely available up until thirty-two seconds before birth, make same-sex marriage as common as hay fever in spring and pack Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld off to Leavenworth -- to these benighted folks I say simply, and in words of one syllable, "get a life." The Democrats are simply too savvy and pragmatic to engage in such illusive political chimeras.

Permit me to be so bold as to suggest one issue to which, in my humble opinion, the Democrats -- and whatever Republicans they can muster -- can and must address themselves in this new Congress: America's addiction to oil. It seems to me that just as oil has been the linchpin of our political and economic past, it stands every chance of being the ultimate stumbling block to our political and economic future. To me, moving away from our gluttonous dependence on oil is as simple, as axiomatic as twice two is four. To others, the mere suggestion that America commit itself to energy independence -- of once and for ever turning off

the petroleum spigot -- is sheer heresy; like proclaiming that twice two is five. Perhaps it is heretical. But to those who think this way, I quote Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground*:

"Twice two makes four is a pert coxcomb who stands with arms akimbo barring your path and spitting. I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes a very charming thing."

Let's face it: weaning America off oil -- a long-term generational goal -- far from being a "pert coxcomb stand[ing] with arms akimbo," is, *in potentia*, a golden path to the future. It requires fundamental changes in the way we consume and spend as individuals; radical modifications in the way we produce and view ourselves as a nation; intrinsic alternations in our very sense of time. If we can and do commit our country to traveling along the long path to energy independence, we can anticipate numberless challenges and innumerable benefits. Among the latter are:

- Taking America's destiny out of the hands of despots who gladly rake in our petro dollars and just as gladly underwrite those who seek our destruction.
- Lessening the inexorable harm we have done to planet earth through global warming.

- Creating hundreds of thousands -- if not millions -- of new jobs in new industries.
- Restoring and revivifying America's place of leadership in the community of nations.
- Unleashing and harnessing America's technical genius for the good -- and not the destruction -- of humanity.
- Giving the American people something it has lacked since the end of World War II: a national challenge that will involve every man, woman and child.

Ever since the days of JFK it has been the American wont to proclaim that "Any country that can send a man to the moon can . . ." For the most part, it is a true sentiment. The one sticky point is that, generally speaking, the first part of the equation -- "sending a man to the moon" -- is a challenge for science and technology; the second part -- "can end poverty [or bigotry, cupidity, superficiality or addiction to oil, as but five examples] is, largely speaking, a challenge for humanity. The first takes brains, imagination and capital; the second takes will, humility and, above all, leadership.

To Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader Reid and all their colleagues on both sides of the political aisle, please know this: if we are to have a future, the future must be now. To whatever extent possible, put aside partisanship, political bickering and the divisive wedge issues that serve merely to strengthen the next election's base at the expense of our collective future, and begin

the journey of transformation . . . the journey that leads not to next month, next year or the next election . . . but to the future.

That future is now.

January 05, 2007 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

January 12, 2007

Waist Deep In The Big Wadi

Back in September 1967, folksinger Pete Seeger was scheduled to perform on the then-popularly irreverent "Smother's Brothers Comedy Hour." Seeger, who had been blacklisted off the airwaves for years and years [due to his having run afoul of HUAC], was slated to make his comeback singing one of his own compositions, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." At the last minute, Seeger's segment -- which had already been taped -- was pulled from the air. The reason? CBS executives thought Seeger's piece was overly provocative -- a punch in the nose, so to speak, at President Lyndon Johnson and his war policy in Viet Nam.

Despite the fact that "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" was clearly written about an event that occurred during the early days of World War II, network executives feared that viewers would take it the wrong way. Needless to say, CBS's last-minute decision to pull the plug on Seeger became a *cause celebre*. Thousands and thousands of viewers who had never heard of the song rushed out to purchase a copy, whose refrain went:

*Waist deep in the Big Muddy
and the big fool says to push on;
Waist deep in the Big Muddy
and the big fool says to push on;
Waist deep! Neck deep!
Soon even a Tall man'll be over his head,
We're waist deep in the Big Muddy
and the big fool says push on!*

To CBS execs, this sounded too much like a slam on LBJ.

Four months later -- January 1968 -- the boys from CBS allowed the Seeger segment to air. What had changed? Well, for one thing, Lyndon Johnson had announced that he would not be running for reelection; he had read the handwriting on the wall. Ever the instinctual pol, Johnson knew that the country had had enough. Nonetheless, it would take another six years until American military involvement in Southeast Asia came to a bloody conclusion. How? We declared victory and got the hell out . . .

While watching President Bush's nationally televised address the other night, I thought I was having a flashback; I actually thought I was seeing and hearing Seeger singing "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Except in this case, the title had changed to "Waist Deep in the Big Wadi." The similarities between Johnson's

War in January '68, and Bush's War in January '07, are hauntingly similar:

- In both cases, Congress and the American people had been snookered into war under false pretenses: The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in '64 and WMDs in '02.
- In both cases, America lacked either a concept of victory or a strategy for leaving.
- In both cases, the bills kept piling up and the body counts kept increasing.
- In both cases, the president's standing in the polls was scraping rock bottom.
- In both cases, America was mired waist deep, and losing valuable credibility within the international community.
- In both cases, the president seemed to be taking advice from no one -- save himself.
- In both cases, the president stuck to the mantra that our fight abroad, was somehow protecting Americans at home.

Listening to the president, I also hearkened back to a lyric from singer Tom Paxton:

*Lyndon Johnson told the nation
have no fear of escalation,
I am trying everyone to please.
Though it isn't really war*

*we're sending fifty-thousand more,
To help save Vietnam from the Vietnamese . . ."*

Unlike LBJ, GWB has all but united Congress and the American public; support for his "surge" proposal hovers at around 30%. Conservatives Brownback and Hagel are now on the same page liberals Biden and Boxer. And unlike LBJ, Bush has virtually no stored-up capital to spend; LBJ had the 1964 Civil Rights Act and his "Great Society" programs to fall back on.

Despite the best advice from his generals and the conclusions of the Iraq Study Group, Bush continues leading America deeper and deeper into the "Big Wadi." And now he intends to thumb his nose at Syria and Iran! Facing Secretary of State Rice, Senate Foreign Relation's Chair Joe Biden warned of an impending "Constitutional crisis." Senator Hagel characterized the latest Bush proposals as "morally wrong . . . tactically, strategically, military wrong . . . the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam."

Has the president lost his grasp on reality? Is he so politically tone-deaf, ideologically obdurate and morally certain as to be incapable of reading a simple poll? Does he truly believe that sending an additional 21,500 troops [an increase of less than 15%] is the beginning of a "new way forward?" Or, is there something else going on here?

As much as I hate to say it [and pray to Almighty God that I am wrong], I fear that there is "something else going on here." And this "something else" has nothing to do with political vision, oil or insanity: rather, it may well have everything to do with religion.

President Bush has, over the course of his years in national politics, made it abundantly clear that he is a devout, born-again Christian. From listening to his words and paying attention to those who are his religious mentors and guides, I believe that he is what Christian theologians would term a *dispensational premillennialist*. That is, one who believes that the Second Coming is eminent, that Apocalypse is nigh, and that it is therefore their divinely ordained task to bring about End Times. Using the Biblical Book of Revelations as their guide, many Christians -- including the aforementioned *dispensational premillennialists* -- see signs, omens and portents in the current of events. They believe that the final war -- between Gog and Magog -- will take place in the Middle East, bring about the Apocalypse, and thus usher in the Millennial Age.

If I am even within the ballpark -- and again, I pray that I am wrong -- that would have President Bush committing America -- indeed the entire globe -- to what we in the temporal plane call World War III. By refusing to engage Syria and Iran in any form of dialogue ["That's not diplomacy; that's extortion," in the words of Secretary Rice], by sending in even more troops into the Big Wadi, by refusing to hearken to the collective will of the

American people [not to mention his own generals], the president would seem to be setting us on a crash-course with what might be termed "Divine Destiny."

I for one do not, cannot, and will not buy into this scenario. I hope and pray that cooler, more temporal heads will prevail, and that we will find a way to extricate ourselves from the Big Wadi. The consensus is there; the numbers are steadily growing; the time to return sanity to American foreign policy is now.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

January 18, 2007

The Arrogance of Power

Dichotomy and conflict are to modern life what fleas are to a hound: a lamentably inevitable irritant. Left unchecked, either irritant [i.e. the human or the canine] can cause incredible discomfort, inflammatory debility or irreparable disaster. In the case of man's best friend, *Flea Bite Dermatitis*, if left unchecked, can actually kill the pooch. In the case of *homo sapiens*, dichotomy and conflict can degrade civilization -- not to mention interpersonal working relationships -- to the point where the expression "dog-eat-dog" is far more real than ironic. Sounds rather pessimistic, no?

Back in 1929 -- a decade before his death -- Sigmund Freud published a brief work entitled *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* ["The Uneasiness in Culture"]. In English, the work is entitled *Civilization and its Discontents*. In this book, Freud makes known his views on the broad question of man's place in the world, which he sees in terms of the never-ending conflict of the claim of the individual for freedom and the demands of society -- civilization. Freud's theme is a very simple one: civilization -- or

society -- is only made possible by individual renouncement. The instinctive life of man is one of aggression and egoistic self-satisfaction. However, the whole structure of culture has been designed to put prohibitions and curbs on him.

Freud posits that modern civilization places a fulcrum between the individual's quest for freedom and society's demand for conformity. As a result, Freud argues, civilization, or its culture, inhibits our instinctual drives, which can -- and perhaps must -- result in guilt and a lack of meaningful fulfillment. Within a little more than 100 pages -- certainly one of Freud's shortest works -- the Father of Psychoanalysis concludes that both civilization and those who inhabit it are going to become increasingly more discontent, neurotic and stultified. Oy!

With each passing year, I find that Freud was probably right; that society *does* breed discontent; that individual men and women *are* increasingly neurotic; that all this discontent and neurosis leads not only to social stultification, but -- even more ominously -- to galloping incompetence.

We see the signs all about:

- The inability of our institutions to adequately address -- let alone solve -- our most pressing problems.
- Our insatiable need to be right -- even at the expense of progress.

- The irrational tendency to elevate or aggrandize the self at the expense of others.
- The willful blindness we show in presuming that our ideals -- or beliefs, philosophies or politics -- are nothing short of Platonic truths.

We see evidence of this in our benighted foreign policy; a policy which posits that all America needs to turn a slave society into a bastion of democracy is the elimination of a single dictator and the holding a single election. Never mind how incredibly difficult it is to erase multi-generational slavery and sectarian animosity amongst people who are still largely fighting battles from the 9th century.

According to rabbinic literature, God originally intended the escaped Hebrew slaves to be in the wilderness a total of 7 weeks; 7 weeks between the slavery of Egypt and the freedom of Canaan. Why then did it take 40 years? Because, the rabbis tell us, God wished to teach that although it is very easy [though horridly lamentable] to turn a free person into a slave, it is incredibly difficult to turn a slave into a free person. In other words, God had to let the entire generation of those born or reared in slavery -- save Joshua and Caleb -- to pass on before entering Canaan. In that way, virtually the entire population would be folks who had been born in virtual -- though peripatetic -- freedom. What we are doing in Iraq -- presuming that slaves can be made into free people overnight -- is nothing short of the

power of arrogance, and ample testimony to the truth of Freud's supposition.

Then again, we see evidence of Freud's contention that civilization breeds neurosis, discontent and stultification in our interpersonal working relationships. How so? Well, when was the last time any of us had a truly positive, satisfying encounter with a government bureaucrat? Or a so-called "team leader" at work? I for one cannot fathom why a person who has a bit of authority over, say a handful of fellow workers, tends to act as if they are the supreme commander of NATO or the oligarch of the office. In the years I worked in government, it never ceased to amaze me how a staff director -- let us say for the fictional *ah hoc* subcommittee on widget appropriations -- often acted as suzerain; as if they were absolute ruler of the empire. Perhaps it is the overwhelming nature of modern society. We feel so incredibly powerless that whenever we have an opportunity to exercise what is even a simulacrum of authority, we tend to go overboard. Again, the arrogance of power. Again, Civilization and its Discontents.

By the time Dr. Freud entered his final decade, he was already a deeply pessimistic man. He was living with the constant, agonizing pain of jaw cancer and watching his beloved Vienna being ground under the Third Reich's hobnailed boot. As such, he can perhaps be forgiven for writing such an atribilious work. And yet, was he correct? Are we increasingly less capable of solving

problems, of acting with competence, of getting along with one another?

America has long existed on a diet of conflict: the rights of the individual versus the needs of the community; states' rights versus federal authority; our dreams versus our reality. For generations, these conflicts have led to both progress [the Emancipation Proclamation, New Deal, Medicare and the 1964 Civil Rights Act] and arrogance [the Whiskey Ring, Teapot Dome, Watergate and Iran-Contra]. As we look towards our collective future, it might be a good idea to reread *Civilization and its Discontents* and see if we might not be able to break this nasty cycle.

For the power of arrogance is precisely the opposite of what is needed.

Beating the Bushes:

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January 25, 2007

The Double MacGuffin

This week saw the passing of former Florida Senator "Gorgeous George" Smathers, who represented the Sunshine State from 1951-1969. Smathers was handsome, dapper, witty and well-connected. Indeed, he, along with Bobby Kennedy served as co-best man at the 1953 Kennedy/Bouvier wedding in Newport, Rhode Island. In his post-Senate life, Smathers made a fortune; his philanthropic efforts include a \$20 million gift to the University of Florida library system, and a \$10 million grant to the University of Miami.

For all his suave urbanity, Smathers was also a typical Southern Democrat; he was one of the signers of the notorious "Southern Manifesto," which condemned the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to desegregate the public school system. Smathers will long be remembered for a series of senate campaign speeches -- which he steadfastly denied ever having given -- in which he pilloried Senator Claude Pepper in a most unique manner. In the 1951 Democratic Primary, Smathers allegedly told rural voters that Senator Pepper:

- "Is known all over Washington as a shameless *extrovert*. . ."
- "Is reliably known to practice *nepotism* with his sister-in-law"
- "Has a sister who was once a *thespian* in wicked New York . . ."
- "Before marriage actually practiced *celibacy* . . ."

Senator Smathers steadfastly denied that he had ever uttered these words, and in fact, had a standing offer of \$10,000 cash to anyone who had incontrovertible proof. In 55 years, no one ever claimed the reward. And yet, whether or not these inanities were ever part of a Smather's speech, the memory persists. Indeed, it has been prominently featured in virtually every one of his obituaries. Talk about urban legends!

No one will ever know of a certainty whether or not Senator Smathers ever accused Senator Pepper of being an extrovert or having practiced nepotism with his sister-in-law. What is clear, however, is that Gorgeous George never blamed "The Red Pepper" [as his detractors called him] for having himself spread the rumor in the first place.

"How's that?" you ask.

Well, within the past week or so, we have witnessed the emergence of yet another "urban legend" -- this one concerning Senator Barack Obama. According to an article that originated on the Internet and then speedily made its way up the media food

chain, the junior senator from Illinois spent several years studying at an Islamic *midrasa* as a little boy growing up in Indonesia. "*This means,*" the inventors of the urban legend declare, "*that Senator Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. [the right just loves to use his middle name], is a radical, ideological Muslim.*" Mind you, this isn't the rant of some dim bulb blogging for Idiotsareus.com; it was actually reported by talking head Glen Beck on his nationally televised program, and appeared on the front page of Rupert Murdoch's New York *Post*.

Reports of Senator Obama's supposed Islamist predilections have quickly made their way through cyberspace. And despite the fact that a full-scale inquiry by CNN [which included sending an investigative reporter to Obama's former school in Jakarta] has completely deflated this obnoxious canard, there are -- and likely always will be -- lots and lots of folks out there who will continue to remind us that "Obama rhymes with Osama," and believe that "Obama is a Muslim on a mission."

But wait; there's more . . .

Once CNN went public with the facts of the matter, the boys and girls at Fox, the New York *Post* and out there in cyberspace made it known that the original smear -- about Senator Obama's alleged Muslim background -- had actually come from unidentified sources deep within . . . the Hillary Clinton campaign! How brilliantly diabolical! An act of legerdemain worthy of Copperfield or Houdini; a brazen smear that begrimes

not one, but two Democrats with a single swipe. By comparison, George Smather's attack on Claude Pepper was little more than a clever schoolboy's prank. If Smathers had been truly brilliant, he would have of course blamed the entire Pepper smear on Pepper himself!

The entire Obama/*misdrasa*/Clinton imbroglio seems worthy of Hitchcock at his best; of paths and clues which at first seem terribly important, but upon further inspection lead virtually nowhere. In Hitchcock's world, this is called a "MacGuffin."

According to Hollywood legend, Hitchcock adapted [stole?] the idea of the "MacGuffin" from British screenwriter Angus ["Spellbound," "The Wrong Man"] MacPhail. In trying to explain the MacGuffin, Hitchcock told of the following encounter between two men:

"What have you there?" asked the man.

"Oh, that's a MacGuffin," replied his companion.

"What's a MacGuffin?"

"It's a device for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands."

"But there *aren't* any lions in the Scottish Highlands."

"Well then, I guess it's not a MacGuffin!"

What we have in the current Obama/*midrasa*/Clinton scenario is, in a sense, a *double* MacGuffin; *two* interwoven acts of political misdirection whose intention is to clobber two

candidates at once. It is diabolical. It is reprehensible. It is also demonically brilliant.

If this is what's going on in January 2007 -- nearly *two years* before the election -- imagine what lies, smears and dirty dealings we are likely to witness in the weeks and months ahead. What in the world are Murdoch's *schlockmeisters* going to do for a follow-up? Accuse Senator Clinton of having been seen *masticating* at The Four Seasons? Report that Senator Obama engages in *philately* with his young daughters?

Why not? Sure beats the heck out of having the public pay attention to such "boring" topics as Iraq, healthcare and global warming.

The good old double MacGuffin: Smathers and Hitchcock must be laughing themselves silly.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

February 01, 2007

If Life Begins at Conception . . .?"

Even at this relatively early stage in the process, covering daily developments in the emerging presidential hunt is akin to writing about a tennis match already in progress. For no sooner does one commit a thought to paper or keyboard, then a new lob, volley or overhand smash makes what was previously reported incredibly stale. In other words, another day, another candidate, another charge or counter-charge, another case of acute *dentopedology* -- herein defined by no less an expert than H.R.H. Prince Phillip as " . . . the science of opening your mouth and putting your foot in it."

As I write this article on February 1, 2007 at 12:15 pm, Eastern Standard Time, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee is the latest contender to throw his hat into the Republican ring. Although I will not be voting for Governor Huckabee -- or any other Republican for that matter -- he is, nonetheless, an intriguing fellow who is worth a paragraph of two.

First, one should know that the 51-year old Huckabee was born in Hope, that incredibly tiny cradle of future Arkansas

governors. Unlike Hope's other famous native son, Bill Clinton, Huckabee was also raised there. Both Clinton and Huckabee served as governor of Arkansas Boys State -- Clinton in 1963, Huckabee in 1972. But where Clinton went off to Georgetown and Yale Law School, Huckabee graduated from Ouachita Baptist University at age 19, and attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. Huckabee is an ordained Baptist minister and was, at one time, president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention.

If John and Jane Q. American know anything about him, it is likely that since 2003, the former Arkansas Governor had shed some 110 pounds, going from an robust 280 to a svelte 170. Huckabee lost all this weight due to dire necessity; in 2003, he was diagnosed with Type II diabetes. As a result of undergoing a radical change in diet and lifestyle, he started a bold program known as the "Healthy Arkansas" initiative. This program discouraged bad eating habits and smoking, banned smoking within 25 feet of state buildings, and had the state start paying for nicotine patches. He also started a "Get Five Fruits and Vegetables a Day" program and encouraged government to "model healthy behavior." Ironically though, he continued to oppose a ban on smoking in restaurants. Profiled in *People* magazine, he wrote a best-selling book titled *Quit Digging Your Grave with a Knife and Fork*, and went on national television to promote it.

Without question, the primary race will see Huckabee vying with Kansas Senator Sam Brownback for the votes and monetary support of his party's fervid Christian wing. Predictably, Huckabee -- like Brownback -- is devoutly pro-life, pro-Creationist ["I do not necessarily buy into the traditional Darwinian theory . . ."], anti-gay marriage ["I think our real focus ought to be on strengthening heterosexual marriages . . ."] and firmly supports allowing churches to provide welfare services. All fairly predictable. And yet, Huckabee is a conservative pro-family values Republican with a difference . . .

As Arkansas governor from 1996-2006, Huckabee -- saddled with a heavily Democratic legislature -- managed to enact the ARKids First plan which provided health insurance for parents of children above the Medicaid income limits. As a result, Arkansas currently ranks number one in the decrease of percentage of residents without health insurance. He also supported the largest single tax increase in Arkansas history. When taken to the woodshed by fellow conservatives for permitting the tax hike to go into effect, Huckabee said, "Pure conservatism means lean and responsible government, not mean and irresponsible government."

In announcing the formation of his presidential exploratory committee on NBC News the other day, Huckabee made a most revealing statement. In speaking of his staunch opposition to abortion rights, the governor said: "I am always going to err on

the side of life." But, he added, the anti-abortion movement has to do "some growing up and expanding. *We have to remind people that life, where we believe it begins at conception, it doesn't end at birth. If we're really pro-life, we have to be concerned about more than the gestation period.*" As bland as this may seem to a pro-choice progressive, Huckabee's statement is truly a cause for applause.

For far, far too long, the voting record of all but a handful of anti-abortion advocates seemed to have indicated that "life begins at conception and ends at birth," to use Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank's trenchant barb. Just look at the records of most of the conservative pro-family values Republicans already in the presidential sweepstakes:

- Senator Chuck Hagel [R-NE]
 - Voted "No" on including prescription drugs under Medicare
 - Voted "No" on funding smaller class sizes.
 - Voted "No" on the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act
- Senator John McCain [R-AZ]:
 - Voted "Yes" on killing restrictions on violent videos to minors.
 - Voted "No" on grants to local educational agencies.

- Voted "Yes" on increases in crimes subject to the death penalty.
- Governor Mitt Romney [R-MA]
 - Vetoed a stem cell research bill.
 - Vetoed emergency contraception for rape victims.
- Senator Sam Brownback [R-KS]:
 - Voted "No" on appropriating \$100M to reduce teen pregnancy.
 - Voted "No" on funding small class sizes.
 - Voted "Yes" on selling guns without trigger locks.
- Rep. Duncan Hunter [R-CA]:
 - Voted against stem-cell research.
 - Voted "No" on grants for black and Hispanic colleges.
 - Voted "No" on starting implementation of Kyoto Protocol.

Mind you, these are just a handful of votes. Nonetheless, they are indicative of a pattern; a pattern to which Mike Huckabee has been wise to draw his fellow conservatives' attention. Those who believe that life begins at the moment of conception; that the human rights of a single embryo take precedent over those in need of education, health care or the medical advancements made possible by stem-cell research, are treading a path fraught with ruts and potholes.

Its about time that someone other than Barney Frank discovered and spoke out on this truth. And although the set and match have yet to be played out in the presidential tennis tournament of 2008, this game goes without question, to Mike Huckabee.

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Beating the Bushes:

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February 08, 2007

The Envelope Please . . .

"The nominees for best Documentary Feature for the year 2006 are:

- *Deliver us From Evil*, Amy Berg and Frank Bonner.
- *An Inconvenient Truth*, Davis Guggenheim.
- *Iraq in Fragments*, James Longley and John Sinno.
- *Jesus Camp*, Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, and
- *My Country, My Country*, Laura Poitras and Jocelyn Glatzer.

"The envelope please . . . thank you . . . [sound of envelope opening] . . . And the winner is . . . AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH, DAVIS GUGGENHEIM PRODUCER!!" [Thunderous applause . . .]

[Offstage voice] " . . . accepting the award on behalf of Mr. Guggenheim is Al Gore . . ."

[The former Vice President, beaming ear-to-ear, shakes hands and accepts congratulatory slaps on the back as he slowly proceeds to the stage. Once on stage, he takes the foot-high award from Hostess Ellen Degeneres, who hugs the Vice President, and rapidly kisses him on both cheeks. Oscar Award in hand, Gore smiles, points, and taps his heart three times. The huge on-screen video monitor quickly flashes to an equally beaming, teary-eyed Tipper Gore, who likewise, taps her heart three times. Placing the foot-high statuette on the rostrum, Gore looks over the crowd, which is on its feet, slowly shakes his head

in what seems to be stunned amazement, then motions for the audience to be seated . . .]



"Members of the Academy, you have no idea what receiving this award means to me, Davis

Guggenheim, Jeff Skoll, Larry Bender and the entire crew. It is both a culmination and -- we hope -- a new beginning. Davis wishes he could be here this evening, but he is currently in post-production on his newest film, "Gracie," which stars his wife, the luminous Elizabeth Shue."

"I wish to offer my heart-felt thanks to Lawrence Bender Productions, Participant Productions, and Paramount Classics for the trust, encouragement, support and guidance they have given. Without them, this project might never have seen the light of day."

"Tonight, even as I speak, polar ice-caps are melting, dozens -- if not hundreds -- of species are becoming extinct, automobiles, airplanes and factories are belching out lethal vapors into our air, and politicians are debating . . . debating whether or not Global Warming is real. One of the signal purposes in making "An Inconvenient Truth" was to weigh in on the side of science . . . to make it crystal clear that our fragile ecostructure is crying out . . . that the fate of our planet is in our hands.

"Back in 1992, shortly before I became Vice President, I published *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. To a great extent, this was the model for what eventually would become the film you honor here this evening. Fifteen years ago, I wrote about what I then called a "Global Marshall Plan," a proposal that might help avoid future ecological disasters. It was my contention then -- and if possible even more strongly so this evening -- that we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle of civilization. Tonight, amidst all the excitement and heady glitz of the Academy Awards, I tell you that we have the possibility -- and the holy obligation -- to repair the planet, to restore its abundance and to radically alter our relationship to it. To do otherwise would be -- in a very real and tragic sense -- a slap in the face of God. To do otherwise, to continue headlong on our rapacious course of ecological abuse, is to sentence all of civilization to extinction."

"The challenge before is unlike anything else in all recorded history. The challenge -- if properly and purposively met -- can actually bring us all closer together. For let's face facts: rising temperatures, receding shorelines and increasingly befouled air, soil and water are the problem -- and the number one challenge of virtually everyone here on planet earth. To ignore the reality presented in *An Inconvenient Truth* is, in a very real sense, to take the Works of Creation and hurl them back in the face of the Divine."

"Make no mistake about it: the crisis facing our planet knows no political, economic or social bounds. It is the clearest, most stark reminder humanity has ever had that we -- the inhabitants of earth -- are all in this together. By facing the challenges before us with intelligent, passionate purpose, by working together as members of a single planetary family, we can do far, far more than heal and repair our world. We can actually begin to erase the human fault lines that have kept us apart since the dawn of time. For by finally recognizing the enormity of the crisis, by working as one earthly family to find a solution, we can plant the seeds of a new and, hopefully, glorious future."

"Is this merely a Utopian wish akin to 'beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks?' I think not. Already, we can see people the world over beginning to wake up to the horror of Global Warming. We already see evidence that people, governments and industries from Canada to Cashmere are

becoming increasingly aware of just what is at stake -- to wit, the very future of our planet."

"Changing the ways in which we use and produce energy, challenging ourselves to begin manufacturing renewable and reusable products, creating new relationships -- these are both entirely possible and painfully essential. Creating a new earth, one predicated on the principle that we are its stewards, and not its masters, can help to begin breaking down all our historic animosities. It can also create virtually millions upon millions of jobs in areas heretofore undreamed of."

"The current challenge -- to love, nurture and repair planet earth -- makes virtually every other challenge seem secondary. For without a healthy planet, without a sustainable climate for the future, our wealth, power and national interests are of less than secondary importance. Personal billions cannot protect against a steadily polluting water supply; increased weaponry will never stem the tide of a rapidly decreasing food supply; age-old religious antipathies are incapable of turning a desert into a garden. Indeed, this is an inconvenient truth we all must face together."

"Where do we go from here? Well I for one, hope to be making reservations for Oslo later this year where, we just may pick up a Nobel Prize. And then, who knows? Perhaps within a year or so we will complete the "trifecta" and begin making plans to move

back into the home for which we were once packed: 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."

"For yes, dear members of the Academy and all my fellow Americans, I wish to take this singular opportunity to announce my candidacy for President of the United States. Together, we can and will make a difference: for our nation, for our children's children's children, and for the good earth that God entrusted to us so many generations ago . . ."

February 08, 2007 in The 2008 Election | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

February 15, 2007

Anna Nicole Smith: The Fame of Price

Back in the late 1950s, I was a fifth-grader in suburban Los Angeles. My most prized possession was a brown clock radio my parents had given me for Chanukah. Even back then I was a news junkie; I spent countless hours listening to radio station KFI -- a nascent precursor to the modern "all news all the time" format. Even as a ten-year old, the names Hammarskjold, Khrushchev and De Gaulle were as familiar to me as Hodges, Snider and Drysdale. In the case of the latter three, I could give you line and verse on their statistical accomplishments. About the first three -- Hammarskjold, Khrushchev, and De Gaulle -- I knew little more than their names; I sensed that they were famous, but did not really know why.

One name that kept popping out of that clock radio in 1958 and '59 was *L. Ewing Scott*, a man from nearby Bel Air. Truth to tell, I hadn't the slightest idea of why L. Ewing Scott was so famous; of why I was hearing his name all the time. It was only years later that I learned that Scott had been accused of -- and then stood trial for -- murdering his wife, Evelyn Throsby Scott. As a

ten-year old, I had no idea that he'd committed murder most foul. To me, he was just another famous name.

Note: Scott was one of the first people in the United States ever convicted in a case of "bodyless" murder -- that is, a murder in which no body has been discovered to bear out that there has been, in fact, a crime.

Outside of being at the center of a sensational murder trial, L. Ewing Scott was nothing more than a rich wastrel. Nonetheless, his name -- if not his horrifying misdeeds -- was as well known to this ten-year old as that of Hammarskjold, Khrushchev or De Gaulle.

I would imagine that the ten-year old's version of L. Ewing Scott in 2007 is Anna Nicole Smith. Oh yes, there are some major differences.

- Today's 10 year old likely has not only a radio, but a television, Tivo multi-band radio and Internet connection in his or her bedroom.
- Instead of having 4 or 5 channels from which to choose [most of which "signed-off" at midnight], the modern child has easily more than 100 from which to select.
- Unlike a child of the late '50s, today's counterpart likely knows most of the sordid details of Ms. Smith's brief phantasmagorical life, her sudden death and the media circus surrounding the disposition of her corpse and of her now orphaned daughter.

Truth to tell -- and sad to state -- today's typical 10-year old [and likely his or her parents as well] knows and cares far, far more about Anna Nicole Smith than about the War in Iraq, Global Warming or the Scooter Libby trial.

The question is why?

Our first stop on the road to understanding must be the media. To the barons of cable TV and the tabloids, Ms. Smith's life and death are a veritable goldmine. For years this unlettered blond bombshell has lived in the glare of the media's baby blues. True, her penchant for self-promotion, her talent for looking and being more than a tad bizarre the moment the camera lights went on, was . . . well, of genius proportions. One wonders if the lights had not shown so brightly, if the cameras had not been so omnipresent, whether she would still be alive today? I guess the media -- like the public in general -- just loves a good train wreck.

Another stop on our road to understanding the "phenomenon" that was Anna Nicole Smith is the Boulevard of Broken Dreams.

For precisely what, was she so worthy of our attention? Her talent? Her having been a Playmate of the Year who married a billionaire old enough to be her great-grandfather? Her outrageous behavior and even more outrageous bust line? My hunch is that the answer is somewhere else; it lays in our need for escapism in the face of horribly oppressive reality. Then again, as the *National Enquirer* has been proudly proclaiming for

more than a generation, "Inquiring minds want to know!" Perhaps the slogan should be "There's nothing like the dirty underwear drawer of life"

I for one feel sorry for Anna Nicole Smith. Even sorrier for her daughter and all that she will undoubtedly go through during her life. For all she will ever know about her mother is what the media has recorded. When -- and if -- she ever gets around to asking for precisely what her mother was famous, what will she be told? That her mother was a voluptuous voluptuary? That her fame began and ended with her price? That beneath the sometimes corpulent, sometimes statuesque body was a very sad, very scared little girl from Houston named Vicki Lynn Hogan?

Early in life -- while she was still Vicki Lynn -- the future Anna Nicole told anyone who would listen that she wanted to be the next Marilyn Monroe. She got her wish -- in more ways than one. But unlike Ms. Monroe, who from time to time evinced some real comedic talent, Ms. Smith turned herself into a living parody. Her brief life and tragic death bring to mind the anonymous wag's comment that "Some people fear gaining fame the same way a pig fears gaining weight."

I for one sincerely hope that some day, America's ten-year olds [and their parents] will start paying a bit less attention to those who are "famous for being famous." If they do, perhaps then they can start paying a bit more attention to the people and events

that truly shape our world -- a world that is vastly more important and more real than those whose fame is their price.

February 15, 2007 in The Human Condition | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

February 22, 2007

Of Vipers, Scorpions and Edvard Munch

Why do I have this image of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in my brain? I've never really understood it all that well. Then again, I've never been a great one for large doses existential angst.

You tell me. Is there something I just don't get?

When the United States Senate even *contemplates* the *possibility* of debating a non-binding resolution on the president's Iraq surge, they are labeled "Defeatocrats" and proponents of "cut-and-run." Then, to add insult to injury, they have their patriotism called into question and are accused of "sending the wrong message to our troops." And yet, when P.M. Tony Blair announces that Britain will withdraw about 5,000 of its troops by year's end, the president calls it "a sign of success," and V.P. Cheney weighs in, proclaiming "I look at it and what I see is an affirmation of the fact that in parts of Iraq . . . things are going pretty well."

What am I missing?

Truth to tell, in a political system that actually reflected majority will, that understood that "We, the People" is not just some dusty, musty slogan, America would have begun diminishing -- rather than increasing -- its troop strength shortly after the last election.

But no.

The Bush Administration treats the will of the American public -- "We, the People" -- with all the patronizing omniscience of a parent who knows what's best for his or her child. In the case of the parent, there is, more often than not, a hope and a belief that the child will grow, will mature, and will someday inevitably conclude that mom or dad wasn't dumber than the proverbial box of rocks. Mark Twain understood the ineluctability of this proposition when, tongue in cheek, he noted, *"When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."*

If that's what Bush and Cheney are holding out for -- that future generations will see just how wise they were all along -- they're going to have a long, long wait. For no amount of growth or maturity on the part of "the lad" will make the actions or decisions on the part of "the father" seem wise or learned. Simply stated, the war in Iraq has, from day one, been the product of folly, ignorance, duplicity and untrammelled cynicism. To continue to believe that our war in Iraq is either a heroic

struggle against international terror or a noble effort at nation building is at best, highly misguided; at worst, it is utterly delusional.

Ever since American boots first hit the ground in Iraq, the war has been discussed and debated in classical strategic terms; of "defeats" and victories," of "wins" and "progress." But one need not be a graduate of West Point or a student of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to understand that the current conflict is *sui generis*; unique and without precedent. This is not a war in which one country's military engages that of another. It is not a battle against a single, monolithic enemy wherein the rules of war obtain. Rather, it is more akin to the overturning of a large rock, under which are nests of vipers, scorpions and other pernicious creatures.

It seems likely that from day one, the Bush Administration had no plan for how to keep the peace in post-Saddam Iraq. Even a cursory understanding of that region's history would have borne witness to the virtual inevitability of what today is occurring -- a deadly civil war between factions that have been at each other's throats for more than a thousand years. Saddam was the boulder; the Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and assorted militias are the pernicious creatures buried underneath.

Seen in this light, another 21,500 American troops [actually more than 45,000 when all the support personnel are factored in] won't make a tinker's damn bit of difference, aside from adding

to the roster of the killed, the maimed and the disfigured. Those Democrats and Republicans who justifiably argue against the surge and push for an orderly troop withdrawal [ala the Brits, Danes, Lithuanians, Moldavians, Romanians and South Koreans] paint it not as an admission of defeat, but as a strategy for victory. But the fact of the matter is that we've already lost. Lost the war, lost our moral stature in the world, and, worst of all, perhaps set the stage for total destabilization in the Middle East.

Many claim that a withdrawal of American forces will actually make things better in Iraq. According to this argument, a withdrawal will make the al Maliki government feel "imminently responsibility" for their own situation. According to this argument, once al Maliki and his shaky minions realize that we won't save them from themselves, they'll finally get serious about overcoming their sectarian differences, and begin acting like a responsible government. Again, this is a view based upon a classic rule-of-thumb understanding of what a nation and a government are. Within today's civil war-scarred Iraq however, the rule-of-thumb does not obtain; either in the nature of this war or its hoped-for aftermath.

As Peter Beinart, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations wrote in this week's *The New Republic*, "*You can't threaten people with an outcome they already want.*" At least two months before the president announced the troop surge, al

Maliki explicitly called for U.S. troops to get out of Baghdad. That he "changed his mind" is likely due to administration strong-armed tactics. But it is clear that al Maliki wants us out, so that he and his Shia allies can, in Beinart's words, "more easily cleanse Baghdad of Sunnis." Make no mistake about it: al Maliki is as committed to sharing power in Iraq as Brittany Spears is to completing rehab in Malibu.

In prying off the boulder that was Saddam, America and her allies have unleashed the vipers and scorpions that could easily destabilize the entire Middle East. The Brookings Institution's Kenneth Pollack and Daniel Byman recently argued that *"Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait and even Iran could be destabilized by waves of refugees, weapons, and jihadists. Keeping those countries from buckling may require aggressive diplomatic, financial, and even military intervention [not to mention a generous refugee policy for the Iraqis whose country we have helped to destroy]."*

It's not a pretty picture. In fact, it makes almost no sense. Victory is defeat and defeat is victory. Pulling out British troops is a sign of strength; debating on whether or not to add new American troops is a sign of weakness.

Kind of makes Edvard Munch's masterpiece a little more understandable.

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 01, 2007

Words That Wound

This past Wednesday, the New York City Council passed a non-binding, symbolic resolution that declared the "N-word" off-limits. Upon reading of the council's action -- which passed unanimously -- my initial response was "You've got to be kidding! Legislating -- even if symbolically -- good taste and decency?" My gut instinct was to see the measure as but one more act in the serio-comedy called "Political Correctness." However, after mulling over the issue just a bit, I realized that the council's non-binding resolution was precisely correct -- and about time.

The thing that makes this resolution so correct, is that it isn't aimed nearly so much at white bigots as at members of the African American community itself. Over the past decade or more, the "N-word" has come to occupy the same position that "Bro" or "Blood" once did. Its growth has, of course, been greatly fostered by hip-hop artists, and the genre known as "gangsta." One can argue that were today's African American youth to have a better handle on the history of American society, if they knew of the truly heroic deeds of such people as Dr. King, John Lewis,

Fanny Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks [among others], they might not be quite so enamored of calling each other by such a vile epithet. Of course, one might also argue that in a sense, the epithet is theirs to use as they please.

The "N-word," that most vile of racial epithets, was for generations a staple in the vocabulary of every racist bigot from Tacoma to Tallahassee. And depending on from what region of the country said bigot might hail, the word would be pronounced according to local accent or patois. Prior to World War II, it was commonplace to hear the word used [along with others] in movies and on stage; it went hand-in-hand with the stereotypic blacks portrayed by Steppin Fetchit, Amos and Andy, and Sunshine Sammy Morrison. My God, there was a time when the likes of Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel [three Jewish men], Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Irene Dunn, Betty Grable and even Joan Crawford [!] appeared in black-face. And lest we forget Michael Richards [aka "Cosmo"] who recently had the gall to use the "N-word" in a tirade-laden meltdown at a Los Angeles-area comedy club, even he appeared in black-face -- in the 1986 British satire "Whoops Apocalypse."

I remember using the "N-word" precisely once, when I was about 5 or 6. My parents' response was deeply serious, swiftly decisive, and without a centimeter's-worth of wiggle room: "If

you ever use that word again, as long as you live, you're going to be one very, very sorry kid." Period. Fortunately, my folks were smart enough and enlightened enough to explain what the noxious term meant [as a youngster I had no idea], and precisely why it was never, ever to be used by anyone with an ounce of sense or human decency.

"There are ugly words for almost every minority in the world," my mother explained. "Even we Jews. As you grow, you'll probably hear them all. But know that the people who will be using them are ignorant, small-minded and to be avoided at all costs." Period. End of lesson.

Mom was right. As I grew, I indeed did hear a ton of defamatory terms used to disparage Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese, Italians, Poles and the Irish. .

After concluding, upon second blush, that New York City Council's decision was far more than just another attempt at being P.C., I decided to pay a visit to an African American friend, Vanita, and ascertain how she viewed the council's action and a whole host of ancillary issues.

Vanita is a beautiful African American woman from "The Hood." In conversation, she explained to me that as a woman from a "Hood" somewhere in Ohio, "the lighter your skin, the more beautiful you were considered." That's indeed a far cry from the "Black is Beautiful!" mindset of just a generation ago. Moreover, according to Vanita, "whenever a kid would walk down the street with a book, they were accused of being white!" Confusing and maddening, no?

I asked her about the whole "gangsta" subculture now prevalent in both "The Hood" and in white middle-class neighborhoods across America -- all those young white "wannabes" who love to "walk the walk and talk the talk," but would be scared to death if they were ever dropped into the midst of all their "homies." Her explanation was swift and sure: "Who do we have to look up to? So many of us come from broken homes; so many are poor. The only ones we see who have 'succeeded' -- those who drive the big fancy cars and wear tons of jewelry, are the so-called 'gangstas.' Lots of kids want to be like them, because that's the only kind of success they will ever see. So they talk like them, dress like them, and try to act like them."

"But don't they know what the life expectancy of these people is?" I asked. "I don't think they ever really consider it," was her response. Asked specifically what she thought about African

Americans using the "N-word" on each other -- even as a term of endearment -- she merely said, "I think it's really stupid."

Think about it: would one American Jew ever refer to another as "Kike," "Hebe," or "Sheeny?" Of course not. But why? Because the history of those terms is laden with blood, agony and horror. Would a Chinese American call a Chinese *lhantsman* a "Chink" or "Slant-eye?" Absolutely not. They know what is noxious and opprobrious. Would a Vietnamese American refer to a friend as a "Gook?" I rather doubt it. And yet, the "N-word" is cast about by young African Americans as a virtual badge of honor. One local African American girl was quoted in the Ft. Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* as saying, "We grew up saying it and it's what I say all the time. It's [the NYC resolution]not going to stop anybody from saying it." How sad. How very, very sad.

Make no mistake about it: there are words that wound and there are words that heal. And despite the glories of our First Amendment, I for one believe that certain words ought best be left in history's trash receptacle. Vanita is right: one black calling another black a "N . . .a" is really stupid. But I guess maybe its part of the nature of humankind to hold on to ancient prejudices; to always have someone you can look down upon.

The great American playwright and director William de Mille [Cecil's older brother] once proposed the formation of a syndicate to purchase an island on which a new state would be erected, to be named "Villainova." The inhabitants would be supported in luxury by a tax on Hollywood studios, which in return would receive the right to make the heavies in all their pictures "Villainovans." In this fashion, de Mille opined, Hollywood could avoid the protests of foreign governments and domestic pressure groups when one of their nationals or members, fictitious or otherwise, was portrayed on the screen in a less than favorable light.

Maybe the old boy had a good idea. If we've got to call someone by an obnoxious name, why don't we just call them a "Martian," "Plutonian" or Villainovan?"

Yes indeed, there are words that wound and words that heal. And God knows, we can use all the healing we can get.

Thanks indeed, members of the New York City Council. . .

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 08, 2007

Something to Kvell About

It never ceases to amaze me how many Yiddish terms have found their way into normal, everyday English speech. Yiddish -- that wondrous medieval amalgam of Hebrew, German, Polish, Russian and English -- is written with Hebrew letters. An amazingly adaptive tongue, it was the *lingua franca* [common everyday language] of European Jews for more than 500 years.

Today, words such as *gelt* [money], *chutzpah* [nerve], *gonif* [a thief or shady person], *mensch* [a person of quality and character], *nosh* [to snack], *schlock* [a shoddy, cheaply-made article] and *schmuck* [either a vulgarism for the male organ, or a jerk] are seemingly as American as bagels and lox.

One of my favorite Yiddish terms is *kvell* -- meaning "to beam with pleasure or pride." [There is, of course another Yiddish term for being radiant or jubilant -- *shtraln* -- but is only used by people who know *mama loschen*, the "mother tongue."] In the Jewish world, *kvell'n* frequently revolves around our children and grandchildren, whom we are accustomed to boasting about whenever they accomplish something of note.

Right here, right now, I wish to take an opportunity to *kvell* or so, it has become increasingly *de rigueur* to put down the Jewish State; to accuse her of being a blot on the global escutcheon. What troubles me most is that many of these attacks come from the mouths of political liberals. Then too, over the past decade or so, Israel's strongest, most vocal non-Jewish supporters are being found amongst the ranks of Christian conservatives. Their support is often a matter of eschatology. But that issue is best left for another time, another article . . .

So on we go with our *kvell* session.

Israel is a tiny country; comprising only 20,770 square kilometers, it about the size of New Jersey. And come May, 2008, she will be a mere 60 years old. As of last July, its population was just shy of 6.5 million people, of whom just over 75% are Jewish. And looking at any map of the region that includes Israel [Arab maps do not], it is haunting to note that she is smack dab in the middle of a pretty dangerous neighborhood.

And yet, despite her tiny size, her tiny population, and the constant danger of living amidst countries that would push her into the sea, this nearly 59-year old nation is spectacularly unique.

Consider the following [you are free to *kvell*]:

- Israel has more museums per capita than any other country in the world.
- Israel has the second highest output of new books per citizen.
- Israel holds more patents per citizen than do citizens of any other nation.
- More than 85% of all solid waste in Israel is treated in an environmentally sound manner.
- Israeli companies AMDOCS, COMVERSE and NICE SYSTEMS all pioneered Voicemail, SMS [Short Message Service] and other cellular phone services.
- Israel holds the largest concentration of High-Tech industries in the world, relative to its population.
- ICQ [an oronym on the phrase "I seek you"] -- the technology for AOL Instant Messenger -- was developed in 1996 by a team of four young Israelis.
- Israeli start-up company TransChip developed the first high resolution camera that fits on a single electronic chip, for use in cellular phones.
- Israel is one of only eight countries in the world capable of launching their own satellites into space.
- Israeli engineers developed the world's first cell phone at Motorola's lab in Haifa, it's largest research center in the world.

- When earthquakes struck western India and Turkey, Israel sent entire field hospitals, including medical staff and equipment, to help treat injured civilians.
- Israel has the third largest number of companies trading on Wall Street, after the United States and Canada.
- Israel has more engineers and scientists per capita than any other country in the world.
- Seamless lingerie that is sold at Victoria's Secret is made by an Israeli company, TAFRON, that also makes seamless garments for Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Banana Republic and Nike.
- Intel's new Centrino processor was developed in Israel, as was Microsoft's Windows XP operating system.
- American industry giants such as GM, Ford, Boeing and Lockheed Martin manage their manufacturing using software from Israeli company Tecnomatix.
- Israel's Giving Imaging developed a video camera so small it fits inside a pill, which you can swallow. The camera helps doctors diagnose digestive tract diseases.
- An Israeli company developed a computerized system for ensuring proper administration of medications, thus reducing the risk of human error in medical treatment, which kills more than 7,000 patients in U.S. hospitals annually.

- A new acne treatment developed in Israel, the Clearlight device, produces a high-intensity, ultraviolet-free, narrow band blue light that causes acne bacteria to self-destruct without damaging surrounding skin.
- Israeli scientists developed the first fully computerized radiation-free diagnostic scanning device for breast cancer.
- BabySense, an Israeli product aimed at preventing Sudden Infant Death Syndrome [SIDS], is saving babies' lives around the world.
- According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Israel has the highest number of solar-power water heaters per capita.
- Checkpoint, an Israeli firm, pioneered Internet and network security technology such as the Firewall.
- The first PC anti-virus in the world was developed in Israel in 1979.
- Israel produces more scientific papers per capita than any other nation: 109 per 10,000 people
- An Israeli company was the first to develop and install a large-scale solar power plant in California's Mohave Desert.

And on and on and on . . .

Imagine what benefits might accrue to the entire planet if only Israel were allowed to live in peace. To me, Israel has the

potential for being this planet's intellectual mainframe. If she were truly at peace with the rest of the world, then nations from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe could simply "plug in" to that mainframe and have better, healthier, more prosperous lives.

Kind of makes you want to *kvell*.

As the refrain to Israeli composer Naomi Shemer's classic song *Lu Yehi* goes:

Lu y'hee, lu y'hee, ana lu y'hee, kol sh'nevakesh - lu y'hee . .

.

May it be, may it be -- Please -- may it be

All that we seek -- may it be.

March 08, 2007 in Israel and the Middle East | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 16, 2007

Move Over Warren G.

Presidential rankings are somewhat akin to the New York Stock Exchange: one day you're up, the next you're down. And like the NYSE, there are the perennial presidential "blue chips" -- Washington, Lincoln and FDR; the near second-tier "best-buys" -- Jefferson and Teddy Roosevelt; the ones "worth holding on to for the long term" -- Wilson, Jackson and Truman; and the ones you'd better not have in your portfolio -- Andrew Johnson, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan.

According to the overwhelming majority of presidential scholars, the "worst of the lot" is Warren G. Harding, America's 29th Chief Executive. Although Harding's term lasted a scant 29 months [March 2, 1921 - August 2, 1923], he nonetheless managed to oversee what historians have deemed the



most corrupt, lackluster and "cronyized" of all administrations.

Harding's sole accomplishments were the pardoning of political prisoner Eugene Debs, the appointment of former President William Howard Taft to the U.S. Supreme Court, and signing the peace treaty that ended America's involvement in World War I. [Note: Originally signed at the estate of New Jersey Governor Joseph S. Frelinghuysen, the marker now rests in a patch of grass near a Burger King parking lot along Rte. 28, just north of the Somerville traffic circle.] In all fairness, it must also be said that Harding did more to "preserve, protect, and defend" the U.S. Constitution than any of his brethren; he had it placed under protective glass at the National Archives.

It seems to me that unless there are some drastic and dramatic changes on the part of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue's current resident, Harding, the "Shadow of Blooming Grove," stands a good chance of becoming America's *second*-worst president. In plain English, George W. Bush is in line to become the absolute "worst of the worst."

To recite the full litany of this Administration's failures, scandals, deceits and cupidinous, vainglorious actions, would

take up far more space than we normally allot ourselves in this weekly op-ed piece. Suffice it to say that W & Co. have planted a giant *What's good for Cheney, Rove, Halliburton and the Texas Mafia is good for the U.S.A.* sign on the White House front lawn. The brazenness, the very single-minded amorality of their actions is simply breathtaking.

Dear old Dad used to say that there are many sins in this world; that among the very worst was "considering me to be an absolute fool." Well, by their words and deeds, the Bush Administration has committed that worst of all sins . . . again and again again. And its not just against the American public that they've committed this most heinous of moral atrocities. No, their venality has permeated the very air ducts of Congress, the Courts and City Hall.

How shall we indict thee? Let us count the ways:

- Perpetrating a winless conflict in the name of national security.
- Sending ill-equipped troops into the middle of a bloody civil war.
- Transforming a wondrous budget surplus into a multi-generational debt by giving hundreds of billions to the "haves and have mores."
- Enriching America's already bloated pharmaceutical industry in the name of assisting America's senior citizens.

- Banging out a patriotic "support our troops" drumbeat while permitting conditions at Walter Reed to become nothing short of Dickensian.
- Outing a covert CIA operative as a means of political payback.
- Permitting energy industry leaders to write American energy policy.
- Firing United States Attorneys for purely political reasons.
- Making the statements "I take full responsibility" and "I had no knowledge" congruent.
- Trashing the ancient writ of *habeas corpus* in the name of national security.
- Permitting kidnapping and torture to be carried out in the name of national security.
- Firing scores of critically-needed Arabic language translators due merely to sexual preference.
- Degrading the term "compassion" to the point of utter meaninglessness.
- Turning a blind eye toward global warming, education, health care, and infrastructure.
- Staffing ultra-critical posts with men and women whose only qualification is their political pedigree.
- Permitting millions upon millions of American jobs to be sent overseas in order to reduce manufacturing costs.

With a record like this, is it any wonder that the Republicans find themselves fielding their weakest team of presidential aspirants since 1928? Who in their right mind would really want to step into the muck and mire created by this gang? Politics and

politicians, which have never enjoyed much reverence within the American heart, are now in danger of sinking beneath the level of pornographers and streetwalkers.

Move over Warren G.; you're about to take a step up in the estimation of presidential historians.

March 16, 2007 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 22, 2007

"Oh Villain, Villain, Smiling Damned Villain!"

Hamlet is a play suffused with lies, insanity and death, mendacity, poison and revenge. It serves as a startling reminder of just how far some will go in order to achieve goals of power and glory.

One might recall that in the play's first act, Prince Hamlet learns a painful and hideous truth from the ghost of his recently deceased father: that the late king [also named Hamlet], did not die a natural death, but was murdered by his own brother, the new King Claudius. This deed most foul enabled Claudius to take both the crown and Gertrude -- the late king's wife and Prince Hamlet's mother -- as his Queen.

How did the old fellow die? Not by the serpent's bite, as had been previously assumed, but by poison. To wit, Claudius had poured poison into the napping king's ear. The revelation unhinges the young prince and sends him careening headlong into the waiting arms of insanity. Hamlet learns the harsh fact that "One may smile and smile and be a villain." He then spends the rest of the play plotting and seeking revenge.

Whether knowingly or not, it would seem that aspects of this

play -- if not the precise script -- are guiding the hands of modern political operatives. For despite their smiles, there are those who find nothing wrong with pouring poison into the ears of an unsuspecting American electorate.

Witness the poison of Senator Barak Obama's so-called "Muslim upbringing." To listen to the smiling villains at Fox, it would seem that Senator Obama is the Muslim "Manchurian Candidate;" a man indoctrinated with radical Islamic theology and patiently awaiting the day when he can take over America. According to these villainous sources, Obama spent his formative years studying at a radical Islamic *midrasa* in Jakarta, Indonesia. Moreover, these sources claim, Obama is disingenuous at best, mendacious at worst, when he claims to be a Christian. Talk about lacing ears with poison!

The facts of Senator Obama's early life are as clear as clear can be. In his 1995 autobiography, *Dreams From My Father*, the future senator and presidential candidate spelled out in great detail his unique journey in life. Born in Hawaii to a white-Christian, Kansas-bred mother and an atheist Kenyan-born father [whom he only met once], young Obama moved to Indonesia, where he was raised in a secular household. According to Obama, he began first grade at the St. Francis Assisi Foundation School, where he prayed in thanks to the Catholic saint. He then completed the third and fourth grades in what is now called Model Primary School Menteng I in Jakarta. During his two years

at this school, he received one hour of Koranic instruction per week. And yes, he was registered in that school as a Muslim.

[Note: Model Primary was not and is not a "midrasa." A "midrasa" is more akin to a seminary; it is definitely not a school for young children.]

Let's do the math: two school years equal, let us say, about 90 weeks. And, multiplying one hour of religious instruction per week during those two years, we come up with about 90 hours . . . less than 55% of a single week. As a rabbi who has spent more than three decades in the classroom, I can tell you that what one can impart to an 8 or 9-year old in 90-odd hours over 90-odd-weeks, is little more than a basic table of contents -- if you're fortunate enough to have great, great students. Nonetheless, Obama's smiling villains claim that he is really a closet Muslim. And, they hope we know what *that* means . . .

To his credit, Senator Obama, unlike Prince Hamlet, has not let news of the "poison in his father's ear" unhinge him. To the contrary, he has responded with clarity and grace. His campaign staff, to *their* credit, has attempted to set the record straight in a direct, low-key manner. They simply do not wish to give this obnoxious canard any more credence or air-time than it is due.

Nonetheless, the likes of John Gibson, Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly have continued to address themselves to the so-called "truth" of Obama's background. When caught clutching the poisonous vial, they went so far as to accuse the Hillary Clinton

campaign of being the lie's original source! If this were Shakespeare, the three -- not to mention Rupert Murdoch -- would all have bull's eyes on their jackets.

Unquestionably, there *are* legitimate reasons for voters to question Senator Obama's qualifications. Or disagree with his positions. Then again, there are legitimate reasons for questioning all the other candidates' qualifications or positions. Frequently one hears that "Obama just doesn't have enough foreign policy experience." This is a legitimate concern, but I ask you: how much foreign policy experience did FDR have before the election of 1932? Indeed, how many foreign capitols had George W. Bush visited [let alone could name] before his so-called "election" in 2000? To my way of thinking, its not how much you've experienced, how many foreign leaders you know, but, rather, knowing the people who have the experience and the contacts. Additionally, if we are speaking of life experience, how many of our putative candidates come armed with such diverse experience as Senator Obama? Wouldn't it make more sense to have candidates who know something about the world of Islam, who perhaps understand the difference between Sh'ia, Sunni and Wahabi? Who know the difference between a *Sheik*, *Effendi* or *Imam*? Isn't it better to have our ears titillated with knowledge than filled with poison?

I am sadly sure that no matter what how well the Obama camp has responded, there will always be those who take their news

and views straight from the gutter-snipes at Fox and the *Drudge Report*. They will continue to believe that Senator Obama is a Muslim plant. Then again, there are lots of people out there in *National Enquirer* land who believe that Senator Clinton is a murderer, Governor Romney is a heathen and Elvis still walks the earth.

Despite the fact that Senator Obama is not my first choice for president, I feel happy in the knowledge that at this most difficult and challenging time in our history, we have a candidate whose understanding of -- and experience with -- Islam comes from more than a couple of hours watching *Laurence of Arabia*.

I hope Senator Obama has read a bit of *Hamlet*. For if so, then perhaps he will be able to answer the smiling villains who pour poison in our ears with the words: "*To be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand . . .*"

March 22, 2007 in All Politics All The Time | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 30, 2007

Mr. Gore Goes to Washington

This past week, eyes and ears across the nation were focused on Vice President Al Gore's appearance before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee [EPW]. Testifying before the committee, chaired by California Senator Barbara Boxer, Gore presented a chilling diagnosis of what ails Planet Earth, and offered a spate of specific proposals for dealing with global climate change. The person sitting before the committee was equal parts inspired activist, policy wonk, sage professor and Oscar-toting media darling. Committee members listened to the man the media has recently dubbed "The Goracle" with an intensity and attentiveness not normally displayed on Capitol Hill. It should also be noted that, somewhat atypically, every committee member [10 Democrats, 9 Republicans] attended the hearing. Isn't it amazing what a few dozen cameras will do for media-addicted politicians?

The hearing had a somewhat unconventional format: both committee Chair Boxer *and* Ranking Member James Inhofe [R-OK] made opening statements. Next, Gore [whom Inhofe persistently and pointedly referred to as "senator"] spoke for thirty minutes.

Following the Vice President's presentation, Inhofe was granted fifteen minutes for asking questions.

To Ranking Member Inhofe's way of thinking, Gore is nothing more than a deranged Cassandra -- a prophetic want-to-be whose visions are the product of an unhinged mind. Inhofe, who once called global warming "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American public," showed an almost total lack of civility; he repeatedly accused Gore of being an alarmist and a gross hypocrite. Each of Inhofe's questions contained not-so-veiled insults. When Gore, staying on point, attempted to answer the senator's acerbic questions, Inhofe complained "You're eating into my time allotment." At one point, committee Chair Boxer, like an angry mother losing patience with a recalcitrant child, barked "Would you let the Vice President answer your questions?" When Inhofe began to protest the propriety of Boxer's assertiveness, madam chair waved her gavel in his face, and said "You're not making the rules." Score: Boxer 10, Inhofe 0.

In all deference to Senator Inhofe, he *is* a senator from an oil state, and, as such, is the creature of energy industry largess. But this in no way mitigates the fact that he came off as both a clown and a boor. Moreover, from the questions and comments of his brethren on EPW, and in the conservative press, he seems to be becoming ever increasingly marginalized and irrelevant. That's one small step for sanity . . .

It is highly unlikely that any of our constant readers need a refresher on the *fact* of global climate change and all that it entails. With the exception of unreconstructed Luddites like Senator Inhofe, there is a growing *consensus gentium* that global warming is a scientifically provable verity. Now, of course, the question becomes: "What in the world do we do to save the planet?" In his testimony, Vice President Gore made many specific recommendations:

- One of the Vice President's most intriguing proposals was to eliminate employment/payroll taxes and replace the lost revenue with a new carbon/pollution tax. Admittedly, this is a radical proposal, but well worth considering.
- Place an immediate moratorium on any new coal plant that is not outfitted with carbon capture and storage [sequestration] technology -- known as CCS. Since the technology in question is still in the development stage, what Gore was really saying is "Stop building coal plants right now."
- One proposal is to create an "electronet," meaning a distributed power system where small scale [to the level of homes] generators could get their power on the grid. This idea has been around for a while; the thought is that centralized power in the form of massive coal and nuclear plants is less efficient than distributed energy that can be

used directly by the producer with excess power being sent back to the grid.

- The creation of a new federal mortgage lender that specifically deals in carbon-neutral energy upgrades to homes. From every indication, this new "Connie Mae" would be a lending instrument to borrow money for efficiency upgrades against the saving in energy costs produced by those upgrades. It would seem that the loan would become a market-tradable financial instrument like home loans.
- Mandate that corporations be required to disclose their carbon emissions to shareholders.

Senator Inhofe wasn't buying any of it. In fact, he tried to trap the Vice President into a pledge not to use more energy than the average household. This was Inhofe's way of reminding people of the widely-reported claim that the Gore's home in Tennessee uses more than twice the energy in one month than the average American family uses in one year. Mr. Gore calmly responded by saying that he purchases wind power. Score: Gore 10, Inhofe 0.

As time goes by, one can only hope that science, industry and politics will learn how to work together to solve this potentially lethal crisis. So long as people like Al Gore are willing to be tireless advocates; to be people who teach, preach and challenge, I am more than willing to bet that we will rise to the occasion and learn how best to protect the planet that has

nurtured life ever since the days of the first single-cell creatures.

March 30, 2007 in Politics | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

April 06, 2007

Diplomacy: Now There's an Idea

diplomacy [di-plo-muh-see] noun:

1. The conduct by government officials of negotiations and other relations between nations.
2. The art or science of such negotiations.
3. Skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc., so that there is little or no ill will; tact.

[Origin: 1790-1800; F *diplomtie* (with *t* pronounced as *s*), equiv. to *diplomate* *diplomat* + *-ie-y*]

Now that we've gotten our etymology lesson out of the way, let's get to the issue at hand . . .

Throughout England and most of the freedom-loving world, people are breathing a collective sigh of relief: a potentially disastrous contretemps between Iran and the U.K. has been averted. And just how did British P.M. Tony Blair and his foreign policy adviser Sir Nigel Sheinwald manage to free the 15 Royal Navy and marine personnel seized in the disputed waters of the Shatt al-Arab waterway? Why through *diplomacy*, that's how.

Throughout the trying ordeal, Blair, Sir Nigel and Ali Larijani, secretary of Iran's National Security Council kept up a diplomatic dialogue behind closed doors. Publicly, Irani President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government vacillated between "pugilistic statements and conciliatory ones." Many observers view this vacillation as a reflection of the ongoing internal power struggles within the Persian nation. Others opine that Ahmadinejad decided to release the Brits in order to draw attention away -- if but momentarily -- from his country's burgeoning nuclear program. Still others contend that the release was Iran's attempt to gain a measure of legitimacy within the Arab world. Be that as it may, diplomacy won the day; both nations saved face; both nations, both leaders got what they wanted. For Britain and Blair, release of her navy personnel without having to make concessions, apologies or an admission of wrongdoing; for Iran and Ahmadinejad, a measure of credibility in the community of nations. It permitted Blair to look both strong and tactful, Ahmadinejad magnanimous and less bellicose.

And while it is true that both P.M. Blair and the 15 Royal Navy personnel will have "some 'splainin' to do" about the nature of their mission [and the words they spoke while in captivity] this is, without question, a victory for the art and science of diplomacy. Let the naysayers and arm-chair admirals score the captured Brits for their "controlled release of non-sensitive material." Let the

Monday morning Clauswitzes stew over the bypassing of an "ideal" *casus belli*. I say "hip, hip hurray!"

One wonders what the outcome would have been had the sailors and marines had been Yanks, and not Brits. Would the Bush administration have even considered taking a diplomatic path? Or would they have seen the seizure of American military personnel as justification *par excellent* for launching strikes against Iran? One shudders at the thought.

For the Bush administration, diplomacy is a strategy reserved for one's friends and allies. For one's enemies, it is to be avoided like the plague; indeed, it is a four-letter word. One of the chief reasons why Tony Blair and his government were able to reach a rapprochement with Iran, is the simple fact that though they don't particularly like the current regime, they have never ceased having diplomatic relations with them. America, on the other hand, has no such relations with Iran . . . or Syria, Cuba, or North Korea for that matter. It would seem that in the mind of President Bush and his compatriots, ignoring one's enemies from afar beats the daylights out of observing and perhaps even engaging them from up close. In the mind of the president, establishing -- or reestablishing -- relations with one's enemies is a sign of weakness; something to be avoided at all costs. To be fair, America has not had a diplomatic presence in Iran since the embassy takeover/hostage crisis of 1979. It was a policy that Presidents Reagan, Bush 41, and Clinton all chose to honor. And

yet, it was precisely because Britain maintained relations with Iran -- despite Khoheimi, Ahmadinejad and all the other polysyllabic Persian despots -- that she was able to affect a successful outcome to *their* hostage crisis.

The rationale behind holding a blind eye [diplomatically speaking] to one's enemies is rather illusive. To our way of thinking, it is both counterintuitive and counter-productive. It also frequently smacks of back room politics. How so? Well, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi takes a delegation [including at least one Republican member of the House] to Syria and Saudi Arabia, she is tarred and feathered. In the words of former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, " . . .the President of the United States conducts foreign policy, not the Speaker of the House." G.O.P. presidential hopeful Governor Mitt Romney reminds all who will listen that ". . . the President of the United States leads our foreign policy You don't have two parties each conducting foreign policy in the way they think it ought to be conducted." Conservative radio talk-show host Mark Levine went so far as to charge that "Nancy Pelosi has done more to undermine American foreign policy than anyone in our history."

And yet, nothing has been said about the Republican members of Congress who have, like Pelosi, visited with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Let us remind the President that in 1997, then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert led a delegation to Colombia at a time when U.S. officials were trying to attach human rights

conditions to U.S. assistance programs. Moreover, while there, Hastert specifically encouraged Colombian military officials to "bypass" President Clinton, and "communicate directly with Congress." What are we missing here? Is there some sort of distinction between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" renegade diplomacy? Or is it more a matter of political party and gender?

Bush and the foreign policy mavens of Foggy Bottom cut off American relations with Syria in late 2005. The official reasons were:

- Syria's backing of Hamas and Hezbollah,
- Syria's fueling Iraqi violence by allowing Sunni insurgents to operate from its territory, and
- It's destabilization of Lebanon's government.

While all three points are legitimate and highly troublesome, how in the world can the United States exercise any sway or exert any influence if we refuse to talk or deal? This is tantamount to a parent refusing to sit down and talk *tachlus* with their child simply because the parent disapproves of the child's actions, attitudes or associates.

For better or for worse, P.M. Blair and his associates have demonstrated that the diplomatic road can -- and does -- occasionally lead to success. It is a whole heck of a lot better than bellicosity.

If the president won't learn from his good friend Mr. Blair; if he continues to exercise partisan pique whenever a member of the opposition wades into the waters of diplomacy, then he will likely be like the late, unlamented Yassir Arafat, of whom it was once said: "He never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity."

Diplomacy: now *there's* an idea. . .

April 06, 2007 in Current Affairs | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

April 13, 2007

Imus is in Mourning

Warning: This essay contains material that is definitely not rated "G"

To paraphrase the Biblical David's lament over the loss of his beloved friend Jonathan, *aych naflu giborim* -- namely, "Oy, another one bites the dust." In this case, the "another one" in question is Don Imus. The "dust" he has "bitten" comes not from the heroic arena of mortal combat, but, rather, from the immoral disconnect betwixt brain and mouth. There's even a word for it, originally coined -- believe it or not, by Prince Phillip:

Dentopedology, which the heir to the British throne defined as "The science of opening your mouth and putting your foot in it." Don Imus undoubtedly knows the concept -- if not the precise word -- to the very marrow of his being; after all, he has made a career of it.

There is no need to recount Imus' verbal sin; it is on everyone's lips. In fact, I would venture to guess that the three-word, five-syllable self-inflicted wound that brought him down is better known than the opening words to "The Star Spangled Banner." By

now, even those who did not grow up listening to "Imus in the Morning" [myself included] know who he is . . . or, rather . . . was. My "history" with Imus is both brief and not terribly positive. As a graduate student "back East" in the early '70s, I heard his show once or twice. My impression, as I recall, was of a low class, equal-opportunity boor.

Now mind you, I have always -- and will always -- defend everyone's right to free and unfettered speech. Indeed, I have been a card-carrying member of the ACLU for a lot of years. At the same time, however, I have never been quite able to see what is so all-fired entertaining about insults or derogation. Don Rickles always left me cold. The fact of the matter is that the freedoms we are granted -- such as our First Amendment right to speech -- carry with them obligations. "What sort of obligations?" you may well ask. Well, how about the obligation to exercise a modicum of self-restraint and dignity? Or the obligation to realize that words have meaning, and can and do inflict pain?

Certainly Don Imus is not the first -- and undoubtedly not the last -- who will fall on the sword of his own words. What I find amazing in the current situation is not that Imus has been shown the door, but that so many others have not suffered the same fate. If Don Imus is exiled to Elba for derogating members of the Rutgers woman's basketball team, why hasn't Jesse Jackson for referring to New York as "Hymietown," radio talk-show host Michael Savage for characterizing the alleged Duke rape victim as

a "drunken slut stripping whore," or Rush Limbaugh for referring to the late Jerry Garcia as "Just another dead dooper and a dirt bag?"

Believe me, I am not in any way advocating that people in the public spotlight or on the public airways be as pure as Pollyanna. No way. Rather, what I *am* seriously suggesting is that those who find great offense in the words of Don Imus [or former Dodger G.M. Al Campanis, singer/actor Andrew Dice Clay or on-air tout Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder] ought to expand their vision and open their ears to what so many others are saying.

Have you ever paid attention to the rap music found on the average kid's MP3 player? A terribly brief [and utterly obnoxious] sampling:

From "The Dog Pound's" piece, "Gangsta Rap:"

Ain't a nigga dead or alive who f . . kn' wit me

Keep the death row chains out

My left connect so hard your head blow

Now let's blow brains out [uh-huh] just thought I had to warn 'ya

Don't come to Long Beach, Cali, take off on 'ya, nigga.

Or from Puff Daddy's "Real Niggas:"

Now how you goin' act with my nigga?

And I will lick shots and run through your home

Or better yet I put your son to the chrome

Turn the music up and unplug the phone

I will kill him, read my lips

You too, motherf..ker if I don't see no bricks

Why there's even a website out there called "Beverly Hills Pimps and Hos," which lists itself as ". . . not just a clothing line . . . [but] a lifestyle. Beverly Hills Pimps and Hos represent the elite Hollywood lifestyle . . ."

I find gross inconsistency in the fact that many of the loudest voices condemning Don Imus come from either the African American or Christian Right community. In the case of the former, one can readily understand the vehemence of their collective pique. But why then are they not also raising their voices against all the so-called "entertainers" [a.k.a. *Gangsta Rappers*] whose lyrics are graphic, violent and terribly misogynistic? Is the collective trashing of African American women sinful in the mouth of a white male but permissible when it comes from the mouth of a "brother" or "sister?" I cannot imagine anyone in the Jewish community turning a blind eye or deaf ear to a fellow Jew who used such opprobrious terms as "Kike," "Sheenie," or "Shylock" in name of self-expression.

In the case of the latter, the Christian Right, where is their sense of forgiveness? Why is it a laudable act of Christian charity to grant absolution or atonement for the sins of a Newt Gingrich or a Mel Gibson but not a Don Imus? Isn't one person's act of contrition as good as another's? You tell me.

Make no mistake about it: I am just as conflicted about the Imus situation as a lot of other thoughtful people. Like countless others, I abhor his words and won't mourn his departure from the airwaves. And like many, I find little entertainment value in condescension, racist remarks, or the equal-opportunity putdown. At the same time, I cannot understand the glaring inconsistency of people condemning those who rightfully might be forgiven, and forgiving those who rightfully should be condemned.

Whatever the case, we won't have "Imus in the Morning" to kick around anymore, because Imus . . . is . . . in . . . mourning.

April 13, 2007 in The American Scene . . . | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

April 20, 2007

Random Thoughts About Random Violence

By now, just about everyone with access to a video camera, microphone or wireless connection has weighed in on the horrific act of mass murder that occurred this week at Virginia Tech. Indeed, the past several days have been "All Massacre All The Time." With the welter of headlines, stories, interviews, macabre videos and gut-wrenching sidebars, is it any wonder that we're not all numb to the point of catatonia? I for one feel that I'm fast approaching sensory overload; incapable of fitting an infinite number of erose pieces into comprehensible reality.

As Americans, we are -- most lamentably -- well-schooled in acts of violence and depravity. Our history is both dotted and punctuated with massacres: Boston, The Alamo, Sand Creek, Wilmington, Ludlow, Austin, Columbine . . . and now Blacksburg. And the victims of these acts of random violence have ranged from the memorable and almost mythic -- Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Abraham Lincoln, John and Bobby Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, John Lennon -- to the virtually anonymous -- Ross Abdallah Alameddine, Jeremy Michael Herbstritt, Liviu Lebrescu, Partahi Mamora Halomoan Lumbatoruan and Leslie Geraldine

Sherman. And despite differences in age and era, accomplishments in fact and accomplishments *in potentia*, they all share that unique spark of humanity that binds us together.

It is terribly difficult -- if not downright impossible -- to respond rationally to that which is inherently irrational. Failing of this, we nonetheless seek answers by pointing fingers. Taking but a brief sampling of the commentary swirling about the ether these past several days, we find various threads:

- Those blaming the "culture of violence" promulgated and glamorized by Hollywood liberals.
- Those laying blame at the feet of the Virginia Tech president, the Chief of Campus Security and the University Health Center.
- Those demanding that the Second Amendment [the right to bear arms] be excised from our federal Constitution.
- Those calling for even stricter gun laws.
- Those quick to remind us that "guns don't kill people, people kill people."
- Those encouraging that young children be exposed to diversity/sensitivity training in order to diminish adolescent bullying.
- Those who glibly proclaim that what need be outlawed are not guns, but bullets.

Even President Bush got into the act. Shortly after news of the tragedy at Virginia Tech hit the wires, Dana Perino, the president's Acting Press Secretary told the White House press corps "The president believes that there is a right for people to bear arms, but that all laws must be followed." Why in the world would the president have his spokeswoman open with this comment? Undoubtedly to assure his friends at the National Rifle Association that he is still on their side.

Certainly, one of the most distressing and contentious aspects of the story has to be NBC's decision to release significant portions of gunman Cho Seung-Hui's photo/video rant. By giving so much airtime to this deranged, delusional young man, NBC granted him a macabre bit of celebrity that might easily embolden other potential mass murderers in our midst. Ironically, the release of the Cho material coincided with a wire story about NBC coming in with its lowest Arbitron ratings in recent memory -- not a single show in the top twenty-five. And despite NBC news president Steve Capus' characterization of airing the video as "responsible journalism," it would seem that he and his organization have sunk to the level of the *National Inquirer*. To suggest that there is something to be learned from watching Cho's insane tribute to himself is just plain pathetic.

So what is the answer? How can we best defend ourselves against the next Cho Seung-Hui? What warning signs should we be

on the lookout for? How seriously should we take another person's mental instability or anti-social behavior? When is it proper to notify "the proper authorities" about our suspicions? Do we have to become "One nation under surveillance" just in order to feel safe?

I regret to say that, like you, I don't have answers to these -- or a thousand other -- questions. What I do know is that violent cultures, violent societies, breed violent people. Way back in 1929, Sigmund Freud noted this in a brief work he called *Das Unbehagen in der kultur* [lit: "The Uneasiness in Culture"], eventually published in English as "Civilization and Its Discontents." In it, a deeply discouraged and ailing Freud stated his views on human nature and the question of man's place in the world. To Freud, "culture" acted as a "fulcrum" between the individual's quest for freedom and society's demand for conformity. As a result, Freud opined, civilization, or its culture, inhibits our instinctual drives, which can [and likely must] result in guilt, anger and unfulfillment. In other words, neurotic cultures tend to create neurotic people. In America, we have always found great difficulty in figuring out just where to place Dr. Freud's "fulcrum." Should we nudge it closer to the side of freedom, or direct it more toward the side of conformity? Historically, we have gone through periods when conformity has been given the upper hand, only to push that fulcrum back in the direction of individuality. It is indeed a thorny proposition. And

as a result, we wind up with the insanity of a Cho, the tragedy of a Virginia Tech.

Perhaps what our culture, our civilization requires, is a challenge; a cause, a purpose, or a goal that will allow us to put the individual-freedom-versus-cultural-conformity dichotomy to good use. About the only challenges we face these days are keeping ourselves properly housed, fed, clothed and entertained. Certainly there has got to be reality external to ourselves; a reality that we can all commonly share.

Tragedies like the Virginia Tech massacre remind us that indeed, there are incredibly sick, warped, twisted minds amongst us; people for whom, in the words of Sartre, "violence is good, [because they] have nothing to lose." Or, to put the same thought in the mouth of Bob Dylan, "when you ain't got nothing, you've got nothing to lose."

But the Virginia Tech tragedy also reminds us that there are millions of good, caring people who are just as sensitive, just as humane as the best amongst us. And it to these people -- the folks we live next to, work alongside of and socialize with -- that we must look if we are to maintain our sanity -- both as individuals, and as a civilization.

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

April 27, 2007

While You Are Reading . . .

Back in 1873, Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner collaborated on a political satire entitled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The novel, which satirized greed and corruption after the Civil War, was remarkable for two reasons: One, it was the only novel that Twain ever wrote with a collaborator, and two, its title became synonymous with graft, materialism and corruption in public life. And, unbeknown to most, it would also become the source for one of Twain's most endearing, enduring quotes: *"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."*

Were Twain writing today, he might well amend his maxim to *"Everybody talks about global warming, but hardly anybody does anything about it."* Well, maybe not everybody's talking about global warming; after all, there *are* all those neo-cons who, like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, persist in believing that this is "the best of all possible worlds." Unbelievably, with all the sobering scientific data now before us, there are still those who, for whatever reason, offer up bogus arguments about why the United States shouldn't bother reducing its carbon emissions in order to avert global catastrophe. "Greenhouse gases aren't even causing climate change," they say, and anyway, "a warmer planet won't be that bad." Of course, these claims are patently false, as recent assessments from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change make clear. Tell the polar bears about how good a few extra degrees can be.

I've got to believe that were he privy to what's going on in 2007, Twain would say "don't just talk about it . . . do something." But what? And when?

Believe it or not, by the time you finish reading this single sentence, nearly 10,000 pounds of carbon dioxide will have entered our Earth's atmosphere. Each passing second brings 1,000 more. Approximately 75-80 million tons of the stuff get belched out into the atmosphere **every single day**. And while you are reading, Congress -- not to mention governments and industries all over the world -- are talk, talk, talking. It seems to me that while everyone else is talking, its high time that we, as individuals, start doing something.

Permit me to outline a handful of things we all can do: at home, on the move, and in the community:

AT HOME

Replace a regular incandescent light bulb with a compact fluorescent [CFL] one

- CFLs use 60% less energy than regular bulbs. This simple switch will save about 300 pounds of carbon dioxide a year, per bulb. If every family in the U.S. made the switch, we'd reduce carbon dioxide by more than 90 billion pounds! You can purchase CFLs online from the Energy Federation [www.energyfederation.org].

Move your thermostat down 2* in winter and up 2* in summer.

- Almost half of the energy we use in our homes goes to heating and cooling. We could save about 2,000 pounds of carbon dioxide a year with this simple adjustment [and save money to boot].

Clean or replace filters in your furnace and air conditioner

- Cleaning a dirty air filter can save 350 pounds of carbon dioxide a year.

Use less hot water

- It takes a lot of energy to heat water. You can use less hot water by installing a low flow showerhead [350 pounds of carbon dioxide saved per year] and washing your clothes in cold or warm water [500 pounds saved per year] instead of hot.

Turn off electric devices you're not using

- Simply turning off your television, DVD player, stereo, and computer when not in use will save thousands of pounds of carbon dioxide a year.

Unplug electronics from the wall when you're not using them.

- Even when turned off, things like hairdryers, cell phone chargers, and televisions use energy. In fact, the energy used to keep display clocks lit and memory chips working accounts for 5% of total domestic energy consumption, and spews 18 million tons of carbon into the atmosphere every year!

Only run your dishwasher when there's a full load and use the energy-saving setting.

- You can save 100 pounds of carbon dioxide a year.

Buy locally grown and produced food

- The average meal in the U.S. travels 1,200 miles from the farm to your plate. Buying locally will save fuel and keep money in your community.

ON THE MOVE

Keep your car tuned up

- Regular maintenance helps improve fuel efficiency and reduces emissions. When just 1% of car owners properly maintain their cars,

nearly a billion pounds of carbon dioxide are kept out of our atmosphere.

When it is time for a new vehicle, choose a more fuel efficient one

- You can save 3,000 pounds of carbon dioxide every year if your new car gets only 3 miles per gallon more than your current one. You can get up to 60 miles per gallon with a hybrid! You can find information on fuel efficiency at www.fueleconomy.gov and www.greencars.com.

Try telecommuting from home

- Telecommuting can help you drastically reduce the number of miles you drive every week. For more information, check out the Telework Coalition [www.telcoa.org].

IN THE COMMUNITY

Encourage your school or business to reduce emissions

- You can extend your positive influence on global warming well beyond your home by actively encouraging others to take action. You can find a wide variety of things you can do at www.theclimateproject.org.

Encourage the switch to renewable energy

- Successfully combating global warming requires a national transition to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and biomass. These technologies are ready to be deployed more widely, but there are regulatory barriers impeding them. Take action to break down those barriers with **Vote Solar** [www.votesolar.org].

Consider the impact of your investments

- If you invest your money, you should consider the impact that your investments and savings will have on global warming. You can learn more about how to ensure your money is being invested in companies, products, and projects that address issues related to climate change at www.socialinvest.org and www.ceres.org.

Make you city cool

- Cities and states around the country have taken action to stop global warming by passing innovative transportation and energy saving legislation. 194 cities nationwide representing over 40 million people have made this pledge as part of the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. Find out how to make your city a cool city at www.coolcities.us

Make sure your voice is heard!

- We must have a stronger commitment from our government in order to stop global warming and implement solutions. Such commitments won't come without a dramatic increase in citizen lobbying for new laws with teeth. Get the facts about U.S. politicians and candidates at **Project Vote Smart** [www.vote-smart.org] and **The League of Conservation Voters** [www.lcv.org/scorecard]. Make sure your voice is heard by voting!

In sum: assuming that it has taken you about 5 minutes to read this op-ed piece, 300,000 pounds of carbon dioxide have entered the atmosphere. Chilling? No. Warming? Definitely.

I wish old Sam Clemens were still alive and dipping that pen of his in the acid of human folly. For I've got to imagine that he would be at the forefront of those pushing, prodding, cajoling and actually doing something other than

talking about global warming. And while we're at it, let us permit him the final word, which comes from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*:

" . . . the citizen who thinks he sees that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal; he is a traitor.

April 27, 2007 in Mother Earth . . . | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 04, 2007

The Haunted Spectre

To paraphrase Marx and Engels, "There is a spectre haunting the G.O.P. -- the spectre of Ronald Reagan." To further paraphrase, "All the potential candidates of the Grand Old Party have entered into a holy alliance to enhance this spectre: McCain and Romney, Guiliani and Gilmore, Gold Bug Libertarians and hard-core Christian Right radicals."

According to this morning's *New York Times*, the 10 Republican hopefuls gathered for last night's opening presidential debate evoked the Gipper's name no less than 20 times in 90 minutes. Compare this to the 7 references to George W. Bush and the mere 5 for Osama bin Laden, and one can clearly see the magnitude of challenge facing whomsoever winds up getting saddled with the Republican nomination in 2008. For whomsoever that unfortunate soul will be, he is going to have to steer a parlous course between the Scylla of the current administration and the Charybdis of his own unique political identity. In short, it is going to be terribly difficult to run away

from one's leader while at the same time seeking to don his mantle. This is undoubtedly why each of the tenacious ten decided to leap back nearly a quarter century and portray himself as the only true imbiber from the Gipper's conservative grail.

It is an axiom of presidential campaign strategy that in order to win nomination, Republicans must run as far right as is practicable in the primaries, then ooze to the political center for the general. For Democrats, of course, it is generally the opposite: run as far left as you may in the primaries then inch toward the moderate center for November. The reason is simple: voters and contributors in Republican primaries tend to come from the party's more organized right flank, while those casting ballots and writing checks in Democratic primaries tend to come from that party's more organized left. Once one has achieved their party's nomination, it is incumbent to move to the center, in the hopes of picking up as many independent, generally centrist, voters as possible.

Seen in this light, it is not, therefore, terribly surprising that the tenacious ten sounded the Reagan claxon with such regularity last night. Watching and listening, one might have thought that it was 1988, and that the man they were all seeking to succeed was the Pride of Dixon, Illinois, not the scourge of Crawford, Texas. With the notable exception of Texas Representative Ron Paul [he who would return America to the gold standard and repeal the Sixteenth Amendment] who offered up the memory of

"Mr. Republican," Robert Taft, each candidate sought to portray himself as the true heir to the Reagan legacy.

One may well ask, "a legacy of what?" Iran Contra? Oliver North? James Watt? Lebanon? The firing of 11,359 air traffic controllers? Crushing deficits? No, obviously not *that* legacy. Rather, the legacy of a disarmingly decent, terminally optimistic gent who could deliver a speech with aplomb, and, more often than not, touch the pulse of the American public. It says a great deal about the state of Republican politics that today's crop of candidates must leap-frog over nearly 12 years of G.O.P. rule in order to find a talisman worthy of respect.

But there was another spectre haunting the Republican hopefuls last night: the spectre of opportunism. Both Romney and Guiliani failed miserably in attempting to reconcile the dichotomy of their "You may think I was pro-choice but I'm really pro-life" stance. Senator McCain, brandishing both a fist and a ready smile, continued to hitch his wagon to our failed policy in Iraq. In responding to a spate of questions involving social issues, former governors Thompson, Gilmore, Huckabee and Romney took the path of least resistance, proclaiming that whatever the issue in question, it was better left to the states. Representative Tom Tancredo stuck to a script whose bullet points were heavily weighted on the issue of illegal immigration. Indeed, he seemed a bit lost in speaking on any other issue. And Representative Duncan Hunter, who proudly reminded the viewing audience of

his former chairmanship of the House Armed Services Committee, stayed as far away as is humanly possible from the disaster at Walter Reed Army Hospital -- a venue which was under his committee's purview.

Truth to tell, there isn't all that much a curious voter can learn about a candidate when his responses are limited to just thirty seconds. So what did the viewing public figure out? First, that each and every candidate thinks the world of Ronald Reagan. That each man loves America and the American people; that each believes we're the greatest country on the face of the earth; that each believes that despite the fact that the war in Iraq is going miserably and has been sorely mismanaged, it is winnable; that benchmarks for disengagement are nothing short of lending aid and comfort to the enemy. And oh yes, just in case we forgot, that they all love and want to emulate Ronald Reagan.

One should give a nod to Mayor Guiliani, who when asked to explain the difference between Shia and Sunni, did a workmanlike job. Then again, it is doubtful that any of the tenacious ten hadn't committed that answer to memory prior to arriving at the Reagan Library. Surprisingly, when asked by a show of hands who did not believe in Evolution, three -- Huckabee, Brownback, Tancredo and were quick to respond. Senator McCain found a neat way to dance around the issue by stating that although he believed in Darwin, he

nonetheless, sensed the hand of God whenever he went to the Grand Canyon. That's not too surprising, for after all, it *was* God who created Charles Darwin.

One must keep in mind that this was only for the first of several "debates" to come. In future encounters, one can only hope that the various candidates will seek and find more authentic voices, will truly grapple with the fetid legacy of the George W. Bush administration, and will park the haunted spectre of Ronald Reagan outside the hall.

May 04, 2007 in The 2008 Campaign | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 10, 2007

Don't Just Run, Stand There!

Years ago, George Bernard Shaw noted that "England and America are separated by the same language." To a great degree, he was, is, and perhaps always shall be, correct. The differences between British and American English are, actually, legion, and fall into several categories.

The most basic, of course -- outside of accent -- would be differences in spelling: labour vs. labor, humour vs. humor, patronise vs. patronize, gaol vs. jail, etc. Then too, the Brits have a tendency -- or should we say "a wont" -- to use contractions where Americans do not: "I've just had lunch," vs. "I just had lunch," "I've already seen that film," vs. "I already saw that film." Of course, some differences are rather subtle, as in which syllable receives the stress: the British *weekend*, *rotate*, *laboratory* or *kilometre* vs. the American *weekend*, *rotate*, *laboratory*, or *kilometer*.

What I find the most intriguing, are the differences in basic vocabulary:

- To Americans, its an **elevator**; to Brits, its a *lift*.

- To Americans, its **two weeks**; to Brits its a *fortnight*.
- Americans have a spare in the **trunk**; Brits put a *tyre* in the *boot*.
- In America, a **pharmacist** dispenses; in Britain its a job for a *chemist*.
- In America, a baby wears a **diaper**; In Britain, a newbie wears a *nappy*.
- And on and on . . .

The above came to mind just this afternoon when I heard Tony Blair announcing his retirement on the BBC; to wit, that he was not going to be *standing* for another term as British P.M.

"*Standing?*" you ask, didn't he mean to say that he wouldn't be "*running?*" Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that he is no longer to be a candidate; no in the very real sense that British politicians do not **run** for office, they *stand*. In matter of fact, the verb used in most countries with parliamentary forms of government is *stand*, not **run**.

"Big deal," you say, "it's just a matter of semantics. It's that old Shavian quip about America and Britain being separated by the same language." Upon reflection, I daresay I disagree. The difference between "running" and "standing" for office is far more serious than "You say tomato and I say *tomahto*." No, it speaks volumes about the difference between electoral politics in two countries that ostensibly share both a Latin-based language and a longstanding civil tradition.

British elections, of course, can come at any time; that is the marvel of a parliamentary system. If the legislature [in this case the House of Commons] can cobble together a "vote of no-confidence" in the executive, that means new elections are in the offing. In America, even though a majority of both houses of Congress and the American people should express -- via votes or polls -- their "vote" of no confidence . . . tough luck. We've got to wait until the next scheduled election.

In Britain -- and most of the parliamentary governments in the world -- election campaigns are measured in weeks and months, not in years. What this means is that parliamentary legislators don't have to be out on the hustings when they should be legislating. Just ask the good folks out in Arizona; their senior senator, John McCain has been "missing in action" for months and months. Indeed, he has the highest rate of absenteeism on Capitol Hill.

Then again, British campaigns don't cost even a fraction of what they do in America. Experts predict with a fair degree of certainty that the 2008 presidential election will wind up costing in excess of \$1 billion. \$1 BILLION! OK, the U.S. of A. is much, much larger than Great Britain in terms of land mass and voting age population. And that does mean the necessity of all those millions upon millions of television ads, which don't come cheap. Still, despite our two-year presidential election cycle and all those millions upon millions of ads, what do we ever really learn

about candidates? How much can they tell us in 30- or 60-second spots? Truth to tell, most people know more about what's wrong with the other candidate than what's right with theirs. In Platonic terms, we're looking at shadows and calling them reality.

The biggest difference between *running* and *standing* for office comes from the literal meaning and implication of the two gerunds. A candidate who *stands for office*, is one who commits him or herself to a spot, position or locale. One may rightfully assume that the "stander" is committed to a place for all to see and to judge. When one *runs*, however, he or she is here one minute, gone the next. Movement and momentum -- rather than stance and solidity -- are the key. What one runs for is, generally speaking, a goal or locale. What one stands for is generally a principle or program. In America, our politicians run; in Britain, they stand.

In America, political commentators, pollsters and pundits are like the touts who hang out at the local O.T.B; handicappers who, in the long run [no pun intended] are in the business of entertaining and making money. The American presidential marathon -- as opposed to the Parliamentary sprint -- is as much about entertainment as it is about enlightenment.

One other great difference in the British/America running vs. standing scenario is in what occurs after the election is over. In Britain, the P.M. goes to the House of Commons on a weekly basis for a no-holds-barred question and answer session. It is raucous,

unscripted and, more often than not, edifying. Here at home, on the other hand, a presidential press conference is infrequent, decorous, scripted and about as nourishing as a celery stalk.

With all due respect to Mr. Shaw, it would seem that there is more than a language that separates America and Britain. If we could learn one thing from our cousins across the pond, perhaps it would be this: that running is best left to those who would exercise, and standing to who would lead.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 17, 2007

Verlogenheit Uber Alles!

Indeed, it never ceases to amaze. Whenever we think the "There-are-no- rules-in-a-knife-fight" attitude of conservative talkers has reached its absolute nadir, somehow they manage to plunge to a new, even more unfathomable level of mendacity. It is one thing to tar the folks with whom you disagree with the tawdry brush of "*Ultra-Liberal*," "*Secular Humanist*," or even "*left Wing Wacko*." It is quite another to charge them with being "*Traitors*," "*Seditionists*," or "*Nazis*."

"How's that?" you ask. "Since when were the words *liberal*" and "*Nazi*" ever uttered in the same breath? Aren't liberals and progressives the diametric opposite of Nazis or Fascists?" Well yes, in the real world they are; liberals and progressives are, by definition generally those most opposed to systems or doctrines that preach repression or subjugation. Nazism and Fascism, on the other hand, are systems or doctrines that posit just that. Yet, despite the obvious disconnect between the two, conservative talkers and scriveners have, of late, taken to using that other "N word" with nauseating regularity. And even when they aren't quite so bold or duplicitous as to use the precise

word, they persist in using buzz-terms that come directly from the Third Reich thesaurus

Need proof?

- In an article posted on her Blog May 1, Debbie Schlusell [debbieschlusell.com] referred to the ". . . deceptively-named, **Nazi-funded** Media Matters for America." [FYI: Media Matters is a liberal media watchdog group that does an excellent job of ferreting out -- and responding to -- the more mendacious distortions and untruths of the conservative press].
- On the May 2 edition of his nationally syndicated radio show, Michael Savage attacked Congressman Maurice Hinchey [D-NY] and other sponsors of the Media Ownership Reform Act [MORA] for seeking "***the final solution*** for conservatives on talk radio." On that same broadcast, Savage referred to Hinchey as "***the chief National Socialist, or Nazi,***" and called co-sponsors of MORA "***the Nazis of today.***" [FYI: MORA is an act that would "restore integrity and diversity to America's media system by lowering the number of media outlets that one company is permitted to own in a single market." The act would also reinstate the Fairness Doctrine to protect fairness and accuracy in journalism.]
- Bill O'Reilly, commenting on the Nevada Democratic Party's debate over presidential debates held on the Fox News

- Network, accused The Daily Kos [a much-read liberal political Blog] and Moveon.org and others of using ". . . propaganda techniques perfected by **Dr. Joseph Goebbels**, the Nazi minister of information."
- On the March 22 edition of his CNN Headline News program, Glenn Beck, speaking of Vice President Al Gore, referred to the same **Dr. Goebbels**. Beck's tirade was in response to Gore's testimony before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, in which the V.P. stated that he would initiate a "mass persuasion campaign" to urge Congress to act on climate change. To Beck's way of thinking, this put Gore in league with Goebbels.
 - On the December 1, 2006 edition of Hannity/Colmes, Sean Hannity, speaking of newly-elected Representative Keith Ellison's [D-MN], decision to use a Quran at the ceremonial swearing-in ceremony [Ellison is the first Muslim ever elected to Congress], declared that the action "will embolden Islamic extremists and make new ones," and suggested that Ellison's use of the Quran is comparable to using "**Hitler's Mein Kampf**, which is the Nazi Bible."
 - Rush Limbaugh has repeatedly referred to the junior senator from New York as "**Hitlery** Clinton."
 - During the 2004 presidential primaries, a column in the New York *Post* described then-candidate Howard Dean as a "follower of **Joseph Goebbels**," referred to him as "**Herr**

Howie," accused him of "looking for Leni Reifenstahl," called his supporters the "*Internet Gestapo*," and compared these supporters to "*Hitler's Brownshirts*."

Enough already! While we will admit that liberals and progressives have also occasionally employed Hitlarian vocabulary to describe the president and members of his administration [as well as various conservative talkers], the fact remains that it is offensive, egregious and mendacious to the max -- regardless of whose mouth is doing the spewing.

In attempting to understand the motives or mindset of people like Hannity, Beck, Savage, O'Reilly, Limbaugh, Coulter and the rest, we are left with two mutually noxious, unpalatable conclusions:

- Either, they really and truly believe that Vice President Gore, Senator Clinton, Governor Dean, liberal philanthropist George Soros and producer/director Michael Moore are no better than history's most vile villains, or
- They really don't believe it, but will say anything to incite their viewers, listeners or readers in order to give their ratings a spike.

If the first case is correct, we have every right to question their understanding of modern history. Indeed, we also can worry about both their moral compass and their sanity.

If the second scenario is the actual truth, then they have lost the right to call themselves journalists. Anyone who likens Gore, Dean or Clinton to a Nazi while broadcasting what is "fair and balanced" within a "no-spin zone" is nothing more than an entertainer of the lowliest, most craven sort.

If one looks into the backgrounds of many conservative talkers, one will find prior careers not in "serious" journalism, but in . . . you guessed it, entertainment. Limbaugh was a Top-40 radio DJ ["Jeff Christie"] and director of promotions for the Kansas City Royals baseball team. Michael Savage [Weiner] hung out with beat poets Alan Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and dreamed of being a stand-up comedian like Lenny Bruce. Glenn Beck, like Rush Limbaugh, was a Top-40 DJ. Sean Hannity has always been a talk-show host. Bill O'Reilly started out as an entertainment writer and movie critic for the *Miami Herald*.

It is high time that these "journalists" stop broadcasting such vile, malodorous bilge; it should be stricken from the vocabulary of the airwaves. Now mind you, we are not in any way, shape or form supporting or suggesting prior restraint; that would run counter to our wondrous First Amendment freedoms. Rather, what we are supporting and strongly suggesting is that the gift of free speech carries certain inherent responsibilities; like the responsibility of understanding the difference between honest, vociferous disagreement and genocidal intent.

We never cease to be amazed at how disputes on issues or policies, no matter how strongly expressed, become the fodder for the basest form of personal vilification. It only serves to dehumanize, brutalize and marginalize; it can never elucidate, edify or uplift. Comparing a senator or former vice president to a Nazi is not journalism. It certainly isn't entertainment.

Instead of "Fair and Balanced," their slogan should be *Verlogenheit Uber Alles!* -- "Mendacity Above All!"

May 17, 2007 in [On the Media](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 24, 2007

When in Doubt Say "Takallam Besch Wesch . . ."

Back in the fall of 1975, I accepted a position as student rabbi at a small congregation in Carmel, California. It was a truly beautiful setting: majestic cypresses, crashing waves and architecture to beat the band. In those days, Carmel -- and nearby Monterrey -- was home to lots of artists, writers, and semi-retired professionals. It was also the home of Fort Ord and the Defense Language Institute [DLI] -- the place where future "spooks" took intensive foreign language courses in preparation for careers in intelligence and espionage. Several of our congregants were Hebrew instructors at the Institute.

About three months after I arrived in Carmel something disturbing happened: the Defense Language Institute got rid of its Hebraists, and replaced them with speakers and teachers of Arabic. The firings were a hardship on our little synagogue, for most of our Hebrew School teachers were DFI employees. I well remember a chat I had with one of the instructors, an American-Israeli named Rachamim. I asked him why the government decided to jettison the Hebrew instructors in favor of Arabists; did he consider it to be anti-Semitic?

"Not at all," Rachamim answered in his delightfully-accented English. "Its got nothing to do with religion, and everything to do with our future foreign policy."

"How's that?" I asked.

"It's as obvious as the nose on your face," Rachamim explained. "You see, whenever the government decides that they're going to effect a shift in foreign policy, the first thing they have to do is insure that they will have people who can speak whatever language is going to become important in the years ahead."

I looked at him rather blankly. Sensing my lack of understanding, Rachamim continued:

"Getting rid of all us Hebrew instructors and bringing in the Arabists, points to the fact that within the next three to five years, American foreign policy is going to be getting much more involved in the Middle East. It takes about that much time to teach people the languages they're going to have to know if they're going to be effective. I mean, you can't just go around saying '*takallam besch wesch*' all day long."

"Say what?" I asked.

"*Takallam besch wesch*" -- that's 'speak slower' in Arabic. That will never do. You see, speakers and translators are at the very root of foreign policy and national security. In that sense, DFI is a pretty good barometer of things to come. And besides," he

concluded, a twinkle in his eye," anyone who's anyone in Israel speaks perfect English anyway. Have you ever heard of an Israeli who needed a translator . . .?"

I was reminded of this long-ago conversation while reading this morning's *New York Times*. There, in black-and-white, was a story headlined "Pentagon Assailed on Firings." The article detailed Congressional pique over the Pentagon's firing of 58 Arabic language experts. Their crime? That they were *suspected* of being gay. How in the world can the Pentagon justify letting these experts in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu go at the very time when their services are most urgently needed? Seems to me that both the administration and the Pentagon are placing homophobia above national security.

Under the 1994 Clinton-era "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, gays can serve if they keep their sexual orientation private and don't engage in homosexual acts. As flawed and tepid as it was [and is], "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" actually represented a quantum leap in the military's attitude toward homosexual men and women. Before World War II, the then-Department of War assumed that gays would make bad soldiers because of stereotypes of effeminacy. During World War II, even though homosexuality was deemed a psychological affliction, tens of thousands of gays served in the military. The reason behind this seeming contradiction? We needed every able-bodied soldier and sailor we could get.

With the Cold War came the 1951 Uniform Code of Military Justice, which explicitly forbade "unnatural carnal copulation with another person of the same or opposite sex." Gays were seen as vulnerable to blackmail and therefore supposed security risks. During the Vietnam era, the Pentagon continued to view homosexuality as a "moral defect." Indeed, being gay was a surefire way out of the draft.

In 1988, the Defense Personnel Security Research and Education Center, a nonpartisan military policy think tank, released a study finding that homosexuality "was unrelated to job performance in the same way as being left- or right-handed." When Dick Cheney became Secretary of Defense under the first President Bush, he opposed a ban on gay civilian employees in the Pentagon. Seen in this light, Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy wasn't all that radical afterall.

Now, with the firing of the 58 supposedly gay Arab language experts, we've reentered the Dark Ages. Unless I'm totally misreading the situation, it would seem that the Bush Administration is, as stated above, placing homophobia ahead of national security. If this is the case, it represents just one more nail in the coffin of an administration that places moral posturing above anything else -- save outrageous profits for its allies. They simply don't live in the real world. And even if the current case is nothing more than a cynical wink and nod toward the religious

right disguised in the sackcloth of moral rectitude, it nonetheless shows just how blind and uninformed this administration truly is.

According a recent Pew Research Center poll, the litmus test of abortion and gay-related issues have been steadily losing traction among hardcore conservatives -- the administration's most voluble cheerleaders. The Pew poll found that 31% of GOP voters name Iraq as their top priority, and 17% choose terrorism and security. Amazingly, just 7% name abortion and 1% name gay marriage. And yet, Bush and the Pentagon keep playing up to the religious right by firing many of the very people who are most critical in our War on Terror. Its reminds me of a classic Bill Mauldin cartoon that ran at the very end World War II: "Willie" and "Joe," Mauldin's two grimy dogfaces, are hunkered down in a foxhole. In the distance are the charred, smoldering remains of a once proud metropolis. Everywhere is total devastation. The caption has Willie say to Joe, "Well, at least our side won!"

If the administration is truly serious about "winning" what they call a "war against terror," it should embrace all those who have the skill, ability, knowledge and desire to assist in that fight. I hope that Congressional efforts to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy will succeed, and that those 58 Arabic language experts will be reinstated.

Otherwise, we will all have learn to say *takallam besch wesch*.

May 24, 2007 in [Lunacy and Outrages](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 31, 2007

Forward . . . Into The Past!

A month ago, ten Republican presidential hopefuls gathered at the Ronald Reagan library in Southern California for what undoubtedly will be the first of several "debates." To my way of thinking the high [or low] point of the less than edifying evening came when Jim Vandehei, executive editor of *Politics.com* asked "Is there anybody on the stage who does not agree with evolution?" Amazingly, three of the ten -- Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo, Kansas Senator Sam Brownback and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, raised their hands. And while we're at it, there was also Arizona Senator John McCain, who despite not raising his hand, did offer that "I believe in evolution . . .but I also believe, when I hike the Grand Canyon and see it at sunset, that the hand of God is also there." McCain's fence-straddling reply has got to be good for at least half a raised hand.

"How's that?" you ask. "Three-and a half out of ten Republican hopefuls don't believe in evolution? Are they for real?"

If I were a dyed-in-the-wool cynic, I might say, "Well, they probably *do* believe in evolution; nobody running for president can be *that* obtuse. It's probably that they just don't want to irritate the voter-rich Christian Right." And while there may be a grain of truth lurking in the cynical shadows, it is more likely the case that these men really, truly *don't* cotton to more than 150 years of accepted science. That is chilling. What is even *more* frightening is the simple fact that they are far from alone. Indeed, a 2004 CBS poll found that only 13% of the American public believes that humans evolved without Divine guidance. In other words, nearly nine out of ten people surveyed believe that God created the world.

Now mind you, I have no problem believing in both God and science. To my way of thinking, the Master of the Universe is, was, and always shall be, the ultimate Darwinian. I believe that the process of evolution -- as exhaustively noted by Darwin -- is the excrescence of Divine will; a rational unfolding of miraculous events. Simply stated, faith and science are synthetic, not antithetic.

What is even more troubling than the three-and-a-half raised hands at last month's Republican debate, is the ever-widening gap between people of faith and people of reason. On one side of that gap are all those scientists who have *paleo-* attached to their academic titles. They are working overtime to discover and disclose the secrets of the universe -- the *how* of creation. At the

same time, an ever-startling segment is marching in lockstep to the beat of some pre-Newtonian drum, fervently believing that they know the *why* of life.

How is it possible that in 2007, there are still untold millions who fervently believe that the earth is 6,000 years old, that dinosaurs existed coterminously with Adam and Even, that Joshua made the sun stand still, and that the Almighty created the universe in precisely six twenty-four hour days? These are the same arguments William Jennings Bryan posited at the infamous Scopes "Monkey Trial" 82 years ago this month.

And now comes the "Creation Museum."

Built for \$27 million, the just-opened "Creation Museum" is located in Petersburg, Kentucky, just a stone's throw from Cincinnati. A project of a group called "Answers in Genesis" -- www.answersingenesis.org -- the museum mocks evolutionary science and invites visitors [\$19.95 for adults, \$9.95 for children] to find faith and truth in God. According to the museum's founder, Ken Ham, he and his brethren at "Answers in Genesis" can "prove through science that the book of Genesis is true. All of it."

Of course, for the Biblical account of creation to be correct and the world to be no more than 6,000 years old, several hundred years of research in geology, physics, biology, astronomy, paleontology and paleobotany, [among other disciplines] would

need to be very, very wrong. While all this may be fascinating to some -- and the God's honest truth to others -- it nonetheless highlights a stupefying fracture in modern society: between those who trust that the future is before them, and those who believe that it is behind.

To understand just how wide that gap has become, consider a few statements that are being given prominence on the Internet:

- [About the existence of feathered dinosaurs]: "They're all fake. They're all coming from China They spend years forging these things."
- "Teaching the pagan religion of evolution is a waste of valuable classroom time and textbook space. It is also one of the reasons Americans kids don't test so well in science as kids in other parts of the world."
- "If evolution is true, abortion euthanasia, pornography, genocide, homosexuality, adultery, incest, etc., are also possible."
- "Could it be that people accept evolution because they know that evolution is the only philosophy that can be used to justify their political agenda of Communism, Racism, Abortion, Nazism, Socialism, Gay Rights, Women's Liberation . . . and Extreme Environmentalism?"

And by far, the most frightening:

- "If evolution is true, there is no Creator, so laws come from man's opinion. That is called Democracy, which is a terrible form of government. Democracies always degenerate into dictatorships. America, it is sad to say, has become a democracy."

[Note: Anyone interested in the sources of these quotes, drop me an email and I shall provide . . .]

It is as if America is going through some modern version of feudalism; a well delineated disconnect between segments of society. Except in this case, the disconnect [or gap] is not between the landed gentry who have everything and the serfs who have nothing. Rather, the current chasm is between those who look to a hopefully endless future in order to understand the past, and those who cling to the past in order to justify a gloriously future end.

It is indeed both sad and frightening that we have come to a point where candidates for this nation's highest office must be asked about whether or not they believe in evolution. What's next? Will candidates at some future debate be asked whether or not they believe in gravity, Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy?

Let's all stay tuned. . .

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

June 07, 2007

The Politics of Fear

"We have nothing to fear except fear itself." So said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his first Inaugural Address. The "fear" that FDR addressed was not some ephemeral "according to reliable intelligence sources" sort of dread. Nor was it the fear of some potential terrorist attack on American soil. The "fear" he was addressing was both real and demonstrable; the fear of starvation, joblessness, homelessness and hopelessness wrought by the Great Depression. "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," was meant as neither a mere rhetorical device nor a memorable sound byte -- a term that would not be invented for several generations. Rather, it was meant to convey a message of courage, unity and hope. It was meant to convey that with fear comes stultification, and with stultification comes the systemic inability to act. That was the message in March, 1933, and a mighty sound message it was.

Fast-forward ten presidents and nearly three-quarters of a

century. Today we find fear being used -- at best -- as a political ploy; at worst -- as an utterly cynical diversion. As political ploy, the Bush Administration has time and again rolled out the "we've got to fight 'em in Baghdad so that we won't have to fight 'em in Bayonne" canard. This ploy -- call it a strategy if you will - - flies in the face of reality. It hearkens back to the days of Korea and Vietnam when Presidents from Truman through Nixon argued that unless we fought the enemy on his own turf, the enemy would come and attack us at home. This strategy had a finite shelf life; eventually the American people rose up and said "Enough!" One big difference between then and now, of course, is that then, the enemy wasn't nearly so elusive, amorphous, or unknowable.

But it is as cynical diversion that the use of fear is most treacherous and immoral. For time and again, the president and his retainers have used fear as both a diversionary tactic and a weapon against reality. Time and again, the administration has used the witch's brew of fear mongering and media management to keep that which they find unpalatable -- or worse, indefensible -- off the front pages. Consider but a few examples:

- On [May 18, 2002](#), the first details of the President's daily briefing of August 6, 2001 [entitled *Bin laden determined to strike the U.S.*] are disclosed. The same day, a memo is discovered revealing that the F.B.I. had prior knowledge of men with links to al Qaeda training at an Arizona flight

- school. The response? Two days later, [May 20, 2002](#), FBI Director Mueller declares that another terrorist attack is "inevitable." The next day, [May 21, 2002](#), the Department of Homeland Security issues warnings of imminent attacks against railroads and New York City landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty.
- On [June 6, 2002](#), Coleen Rowley, the FBI agent who unsuccessfully tried to warn her superiors about the specialized flight training taken by Zacarias Moussaoui, testifies before Congress. [Four days later](#), Attorney General Ashcroft, speaking from Russia, announces that terror suspect Jose Padilla has been arrested, thus foiling a potential radiation bomb attack on the U.S. It is later shown that at the time of Ashcroft's announcement, Padilla had already been in custody for more than a month.
 - On [December 17, 2003](#), 9/11 Commission co-chair Thomas Kean declares that the attacks were preventable. [The next day](#), a federal appeals court in Philadelphia rules that Padilla cannot be kept in custody indefinitely without charges. On [December 21, 2003](#), Homeland Security raises the threat level to "Orange," citing "credible intelligence" of further plots to crash airplanes in U.S. cities.
 - On [July 6, 2004](#), Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry selects Senator John Edwards as his running mate. This event leads off the nightly news and produces a

- bump in the polls for Kerry/Edwards. Two days later, Tom Ridge warns of information that al Qaeda is planning to attack the U.S. during the summer or autumn. As a result, Homeland Security raises the threat level to "Orange" in New York, New Jersey, and Washington. This effectively knocks Kerry/Edwards off the front page.
- On May 27, 2007, Greenburg, Kansas is leveled by a tornado. Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius goes before the nation's cameras and states that because much of her state's national guard and its equipment have been deployed to Iraq, it is terribly difficult to respond to the current disaster. And, she adds, she really doesn't want to think what will happen if another tornado hits. The very next day, authorities announce that they have foiled a plot to attack soldiers at Fort Dix in New Jersey. The alleged terrorists, authorities inform, were planning on entering the fort disguised as pizza delivery men. After several days, nothing more is heard of the plot.
 - On June 4, 2007, Democratic presidential aspirants ready themselves for their second debate. On Capitol Hill, A.G. Alberto Gonzalez is scheduled to testify before a Senate committee looking into the firing of United States Attorneys. The day before the debate and the scheduled hearings, the U.S. Attorney for Brooklyn announces that authorities have identified a small band of terrorists who

were planning on blowing up the fuel pipeline that serves JFK airport in Queens. In her announcement, the U.S. Attorney states that had the plot succeeded, it would have created a calamity of unfathomable proportions. Experts quickly rebut, showing that the alleged plotters had neither the intelligence, equipment nor resources to carry out the attack. Additionally, it is shown that jet fuel, although flammable, is not easily ignited, and that the 40-mile pipeline has innumerable shut-off valves along the way.

The above, is by no means an exhaustive list. It does, however, point to the Bush Administration's continued use of fear and the threat of terror as political tools. For every time a plot is "uncovered," each episode of America's terror-alert barometer changing colors, is accompanied by some administration official reminding us that Iraq, al Quada and 9/11 are all inextricably bound together. This, of course, flies in the face of documents that prove quite the opposite. What they are doing, in essence, is creating a political reality that best serves their purposes. And that political reality, is based on fear.

If FDR were alive today, perhaps he would emend his statement to "We have nothing to fear except the fear mongers themselves."

It gives fear a bad name . . .

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

June 14, 2007

Two Little Words

Back in 1946, J. L. Austin [1911-1960], the White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, published a highly influential paper entitled "Other Minds." In it, Austin attacked what was at the time an eternal verity in the world of linguistic philosophy: that the chief business of sentences is to state facts. "Not so!" Austin argued. There are, he posited, lots of other uses for words and sentences. One example he gave was what he called the *performative utterance* -- brief statements whose words are actions within themselves.

Are we sufficiently confused? Four simple examples will put us all on the road to philosophical enlightenment -- on a par with Austin, Wittgenstein and G.E. Moore:

- "I do" -- a self-actuated change in personal status
- "I apologize" -- a self-actuated personal status change
- "The court is now in session" -- a conferred environment status change
- "Yer out!" -- ask any baseball player what this means

I doubt whether George W. Bush has ever heard of -- let alone read -- J. L. Austin. And yet, despite the undoubted paucity of his knowledge in the rarefied air of linguistic philosophy, he has somehow managed to unconsciously identify a chink in Professor Austin's didactic armor. How so? Well, with two little words -- "*Mission Accomplished!*" he has given us an example of a

performative utterance that is both self-actualizing and patently false! Or is it?

Perhaps W's "Mission Accomplished!" was a performative utterance; perhaps he was referring to a "mission" that only he and his Carlyle-Haliburton-Baker Botts LLP-Neocon-Big Oil-Texas Mafia buddies understood. "Mission Accomplished!" definitely *wasn't* what, on the surface, it appeared to be: a successful conclusion to a stated task. I think that the "mission" he'd "accomplished" was the defanging of Saddam, his government and his oil so that Saudi princes and Exxon-Mobil could push their profit margins to unimagined heights.

This is a subject for another day and another article. For anyone interested in digging deeper into what was originally called "Operation Iraqi Liberation" -- yes Virginia, the acronym is **O.I.L.** -- I highly recommend Greg Palast's *Armed Madhouse*, easily one of the most maddening and unsettling books of the past half-dozen years.

But let us return to the subject of linguistics.

The other day, while basking in the passionate embrace of our mighty allies Albania and Bulgaria, the president was asked to comment on the upcoming vote of no confidence on A.G. Alberto Gonzalez. Saith W., and I quote: *"They can have their votes of no-confidence but it's not going to make the determination about who serves in **my government.**"*

My government? The last time I checked, the term "**My government**" was the exclusive preserve of monarchs. It is one thing for H.R.M. Queen Elizabeth to speak of "My government" during a Throne Speech before Parliament; it is quite another for an American president to use it. If I'm not mistaken, there is still some historic document out there that has the words "government of the people, by the people and for the people" in it. Where in the name of Howard Beale did he come up with this "**My government**" folderol?

I have put the words "my government in red, because that is what I'm seeing. I've angrily concluded that the president's use of "my government" isn't merely the latest in a litany of linguistic gaffs. I am shuddering with both fear and apoplectic anger, because through his deeds, this is no doubt what the man truly believes: it is *his* government, not *ours*.

What's next? *Me* the people? *Me are* the world? *Me* hold these truths to be self evident? The mind boggles at the thought.

Throughout history, American presidents have tended to pay greater attention to their legacy as their time in office winds down; for precisely what will history remember them? Sometimes they succeed -- Eisenhower's warning about the "Military Industrial Compelex" -- and sometimes they fail -- Wilson's campaign for the League of Nations and Hoover's tepid, heartless response to the Depression. But succeed or fail, it's generally not for lack of trying. In the case of George W. Bush, he is so completely in thrall to his various handlers and puppet masters -- James A. Baker, III, "Darth" Cheney and Karl Rove to name but three -- that he is completely unaware that in the world of big-league politics, history has the final say, the ultimate "thumbs up" or "thumbs down."

It is quite possible that George W. Bush's legacy will be summarized in those two little words he uttered the other day. Forget how he squandered a \$5.2 trillion budget surplus. Forget about how he lied us into an unwinnable war in Iraq. Forget about how he permitted Big Oil to dictate our energy policy and the health care industry to create a windfall for themselves through the bogus "prescription drug coverage" initiative. You can forget how he raided the American Treasury and gave hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts to those who don't need them. You can even forget about how he managed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in Florida and surrounded himself with the likes of Libby, Abramoff and Wolfowitz. No, it's those two little words -- "My government" for which he will likely be best remembered.

I am deeply proud to be an American. Truth to tell, this wasn't always so. As a student in the '60s, I will admit that I carried banners, didn't trust anyone over thirty, and chanted "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, N.L.F. is gonna' win." That was then, and now is now. Today, I find myself both deeply embarrassed and deeply troubled by what it means to be an American. Proud, but troubled. This president does not speak for me. I do not share this president's understanding of America's role in the world. I hate to think how many years it's going to take us to climb out of the economic chasm he has created; how many years it will take until once again, we are truly a beacon on a holy hill.

Two little words . . . it's a hell of a legacy for George W. Bush. It's a crying shame for us all.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

June 22, 2007

Habeas Crapus

Dear President Bush:

Now that your public approval ratings have sunk to such a low ebb [26%] that you're in grave danger of breaking "Tricky Dickie's" record for disapprobation [23%], the time has come to have it out, California Kid to Texas Troglodyte. While I cannot find it in my heart to hold animus for you as an individual, I do, nonetheless, damn, detest, despise and execrate your administration and all that it has done to bring American down to the level of a rogue nation. Still with me, Mr. President? Let's get to the "down-and-dirty" details:

- You have lied us into a fraudulent war -- a war that has no end in sight.
- You have gutted our treasury in order to enrich the "haves and have-mores."

- You have attempted to privatize everything from Social Security to Homeland Security.
- You have virtually ignored the poor folks of New Orleans, who are still living in substandard trailer parks.
- You have managed to steal not one, but two presidential elections.
- You have utterly failed the nation's schoolchildren with this inane "No Child Left Behind" nonsense. [Or is that "No Child's Behind Left?"]
- You have bypassed Congress by permitting the nation's most powerful lobbyists to write legislation.
- You have stood in firm opposition to the collective wisdom of science -- can you say "Global Warming," or "Stem Cell Research?"
- You have seriously blurred the line between politics and policy.
- You have foisted upon this great nation public servants whose only claim to fame is being a friend or factotum for the rich and powerful.
- You have shown an almost total disregard for the rule of law.
- You have eviscerated the Constitution of the United States of America.
- You have virtually extinguished that beacon of light that was, until recently, the hope of the world.

Get the point? Can you understand why your ratings are in the crapper? In less than seven years, you have changed this nation's motto from *E Pluribus Unum* ["Out of many, comes one"] to *Sacro Egoismo* ["Consecrated Selfishness"].

You know something, Mr. President, I haven't yet listed what is, to my way of thinking, the most frightening, treacherous and patently un-American of all your administration's activities: the revocation of *Habeas Corpus*, otherwise known as "The Great Writ."

Now, just in case you were absent or sleeping one off the day *habeas corpus* was being discussed at Andover, Harvard, or Yale, permit me to turn the lamp of enlightenment up just a click.

Habeas corpus ad subjiciendum [that's the term in full] is Latin for, roughly, "We command you to show us the body." It is an incredibly important legal right. As originally construed -- and as embodied in our Constitution -- *habeas corpus* is the inalienable right of people to seek relief from unlawful imprisonment; to know why in the heck they're being detained in the first place. Believe me, Mr. President, *habeas corpus* wasn't the brainchild of some secular humanist from Boston or Beverly Hills, 90210. No, it has been around ever since the 12th century. Way back then, England's King Henry II [who, for all I know is one of your relatives] issued what was probably the first such writ. As explained by Blackstone [a pretty sharp legal

beagle], *The king is at all times entitled to have an account, why the liberty of any of his subjects is restrained, wherever that restraint may be inflicted.*

What this means, Mr. President is that no one should be arrested without a warrant, or imprisoned without knowing the reason for that arrest. Further, they may not be denied a speedy trial. If this sounds like the work of some devious lefty with terrorism on the brain, you may want to check out our Constitution. For there, enshrined in Article One, section 9, are the words, *"The privilege of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion, or the public safety may require it."*

Now I realize that you and your brain trust consider the horror of 9/11 to qualify under *" . . . or the public safety may require it"* part of the clause. Which is why, smack dab in the middle of the "Military Commissions Act," which your Republican Congress passed without so much as a whimper last September 26, the right of *habeas corpus* was suspended. In your signing statement, you said, "This legislation . . . is part of making sure that we do have the capacity to protect you. Our most solemn job is the security of this country." With a simple stroke of the pen, you, Mr. President, did more to undermine that which makes America worth fighting for, than any of your predecessors.

The senators who did read the fine print were appalled. Senator Leahy said, "The bill before us would not

merely suspend the great writ -- the great writ -- the writ of *habeus corpus*, it just eliminates it entirely. . . . Conditions for suspending *habeus corpus* have not been met. " Even Senator Specter -- a member of your own party -- said, "We do not have a rebellion or an invasion."

How is it possible that we, the American people were unaware that one of our most basic rights had been taken away? I guess we were just too busy paying attention to the Mark Foley scandal -- which broke precisely *two days* after the bill was passed. It reminds me of my old professor, Tom Lehrer, the mathematician/satirist, who, when introducing a song about a critical government program, mused "I guess you people in San Francisco wouldn't have read or heard about this, because it happened during baseball season." Well, we've all heard about it now -- the suspension of *habeas corpus* -- and we're going to do something about it.

I know you claim that this suspension was enacted only to go after "enemy terrorists" and will never apply to American citizens. To be terribly blunt, Mr. President, I neither believe nor trust you. You have ringed your administration with such a cordon of extra-legal invincibility as to make the Divine Right of Kings pale by comparison. Once power is given, it takes a truly strong, far-sighted individual to resist the temptation to use it. And you, Mr. President, I fear, are not that individual. I well recall the words of Alexander Hamilton, which he wrote in the

Federalist Paper [no. 84]: *The practice of arbitrary imprisonments, [has] been in all ages, [one of] the favorite and most formidable instruments of tyranny.*

[Note]: On June 26, tens of thousands of Americans are going to be rallying in Washington for a Day of Action to Restore Law and Justice. For those who cannot attend in person, you may wish to sign a virtual petition demanding the restoration of this most basic legal protection. You can sign the petition by logging on to

<http://www.pfaw.org/go/RestoreHabeas>

The suspension -- or elimination -- of *habeus corpus* makes a mockery of our claim to be a nation of laws. With a single stroke of the pen, you have turned *habeus corpus* into *habeas crapus*. You have made us a pariah nation in much of the world, a place where rendition, false imprisonment and torture are carried out under the guise of "national security." Where oh where, Mr. President, will it all end?

Yours truly,

Kurt F. Stone

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

June 28, 2007

The Air They Breathe

Yesterday, while sampling a smorgasbord of cable and Internet newscasts, I made a rather startling discovery: that Ann Coulter and Paris Hilton are the same person! Well, perhaps not *literally* the same person, but goodness knows, they certainly *do* share a couple of noisome traits. To wit:

- **Both** are anorexic blonds who, in the eyes of some, qualify as good-looking.
- **Both** know precisely what to do the moment the camera lights go on.
- **Both** understand that because fame is so fleeting, they'd better get "theirs" while they can.
- **Both** add precious little to the future of Western Civilization as we know it.
- **Both** are way up there on the Google Search Engine List [Approximately 66.3 million sites for Ms. Hilton, 2.7 million for Ms. Coulter.]
- **Both** seem to date only men who have need of publicists.

- **Far more people** can identify them than their home state's two United States senators.
- **Both** are incredibly apt symbols for the shallowness that pervades our modern media-driven society.

Oh yes, there are some basic dissimilarities betwixt the two: Ms. Hilton has a GED; Ms. Coulter graduated *cum laude* from Cornell and was an editor of the *Michigan Law Review*. Ms. Coulter claims to be a big fan of the Greatful Dead, *Anna Karenina*, *Wuthering Heights* and "anything by [satirist] Dave Barry;" Ms. Hilton's tastes in music and literature are as yet unknown. Where Ms. Hilton's Internet Movie Data Base entry shows that she has appeared in 18 movies, produced one [National Lampoons "Pledge This"] and had her own cable TV show, Ms. Coulter has but a single credit to her name, something called "The 1/2 News Hour," starring the Hollywood heavyweights Kurt Long, Jennifer Robinson and Jamie McShane. Only one has ever -- to the best of my knowledge -- been in the slammer. And again, to the best of my knowledge, only one stands accused of giving political trash talk a very, very bad name.

To be perfectly fair to Ms. Hilton, no one can really expect her to be much more than the clothes-horse media darling she is. She was, after all, raised in the gilded lap of luxury and has yet to learn the *words noblesse oblige* -- French for "Hey spoiled rich kid, what have you done for society lately?"

Ms. Coulter, as Grandma would have said in an unguarded moment, "is a whole other *geschichte* -- a completely different kettle of cholent. For Ann Coulter, unlike Paris Hilton, has made her way to fame and fortune by being mean, abrasive and singularly shameless. She reminds me of an aspiring politician I met a few years back who, when caught up in a particularly smarmy scandal, uttered the immortal words, "Talk about me good, talk about me bad, I don't really give a sh. ., just so long as you talk about me!"

In recent memory, Ms. Coulter has aimed her quiver of poison-tipped arrows at Bill Clinton ["shows some level of latent homosexuality"], Hillary Clinton ["I'd put good money on her coming out of the closet"], Al Gore ["a total fag"], 9-11 widows [". . . self-obsessed millionaires reveling in their status as celebrities"] and Ted Kennedy ["a human dirigible"].

And just when you thought she could not possibly sink any lower, comes her unbelievable spume against Senator John Edwards. For not only has the nasty Ms. Coulter called the former North Carolina senator "a faggot" and accused him of having a bumper sticker that reads "Ask me About My Dead Son;" just the other day she was quoted as saying, "If I'm going to say anything about John Edwards in the future, I'll just wish he has been killed in a terrorist assassination plot [!]"

This is funny? This is a woman who deserves to be interviewed on such national broadcasts as "Hardball," and "The Today

Show?" Is she really so vindictive, debased and irreparably damaged as to actually believe what she is saying? Or, is there something else going on here?

I cannot, and therefore will not, speculate as to what she truly believes when she is alone, the lights are low, and she lays her tawny tresses upon the pillow of recumbent splendor. I have no choice but to take her at her word. And that means she really *does* believe that all liberals are "godless," that evolution is a crock, that the American public school system is history's greatest exemplar of state-sponsored atheism, and that the vast majority of national Democrats suffer from gender confusion.

Within the same breath, I cannot help but stand in wonder at her timing. For it seems that whenever Ms. Coulter publishes a new book, the level of puerile caterwauling raises up several decibels; her nastiness soars into the stratosphere. But heck, I can't really blame her. Hucksterism, when all is said and done, is as old as *the Elephantine Papyri*, as American as Betsy Ross or Betty Grable. What and whom I do blame, is you, me, and the media at large, without whom, Ann Coulter -- not to mention her "twin," Paris Hilton, would likely not exist in the first place.

Make no mistake about it: we are the very air Ann Coulter and Paris Hilton breathe. To them, it doesn't matter a morsel if we, the reading, viewing public are shocked, disgusted, outraged or incensed by their words or deeds. Just so long as we continue watching, reading, and responding. So long as we continue

paying attention, we continue providing them with the oxygen they so desperately need. Turn off the attention, they suffer social and cultural asphyxiation. I know how terribly difficult this can be; don't we all have a tendency to gawk at accidents on the highway?

The media, over which we have less control -- well, that's another tale of woe. Every once in a while, the mavens of Madison Avenue do rise up and smother some obloquious dragon - - Don Imus and Dan Rather come to mind. More often than not, however, they continue providing the very air the "famous for being famous" so desperately need. If CBS can pull the plug on Imus and forget that Rather ever existed, why can't Chris Matthews, Matt Lauer, Wolf Blitzer and even Keith Olbermann? Why indeed? In a word: ratings.

One of philosophy's great conundrums is, "If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear it, does it still make a sound?" The question before us today is similar: "If we stop paying attention to "The Twins," can they continue breathing?"

Let Ms. Hilton and Ms. Coulter learn to live on helium. At least then, they'll just float away . . .

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 04, 2007

"The Law is a Ass[et]"

Today is the 4th of July, the nation's 231st birthday. It is a day to enjoy the company of family and friends, gaze skyward at the "rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air" and hopefully to spend a few moments reflecting on the wonder and glory that is the United States of America.

The U.S.A. is, of course, one of history's truly great success stories. And as much as we may believe that this country was created through heroic military insurrection, it was, in truth, created through sublime debate; a debate about the nature and supremacy of law. Who could have predicted back in 1776 that we would still be in business in 2007? Who could have known that we would become the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the history of the planet? And most importantly, who could have foreseen that even at the age of 231, the debate over the primacy of law would still be in progress? I would like to believe that Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Hamilton and the rest had at least an inkling of what they were bequeathing to posterity.

In reality, the fact that after more than two centuries we are still engaged in an eternal debate over the relationship between the rule of law and the rights of the governed, should come as no great surprise. After all, we are, as far as I know, the first and only nation that owes its creation far more to lawyers than lieutenants. That the Framers chose to place ultimate authority in the hands of the governed, shows both their brilliance and hopefulness. They really, truly believed that if the United States were to succeed, it would have to be a nation of laws, not of men.

Fast forwarding from 1776 to 2007, I have this mental image of the Founders sitting in the heavenly parlor; Jefferson sipping his favorite French wine, Madison enjoying his Earl Grey, and Adams chugging his milk. Their faces are drawn; they all look rather dour. For they, perhaps more than any who have come after them, understand the incredible seriousness of our current situation; to wit, the highjacking of the law.

I cannot imagine the Founders saying the names "President George W. Bush," "Vice President Dick Cheney," "Presidential Advisor Carl Rove," or "Attorney General Alberto Gonzales" without having them stick in their craw. I *can* imagine them beseeching a benevolent God to effect a Divine miracle -- a miracle that will save the United States of America from the hands these contemptible usurpers.

The Founders and Framers had a benevolent -- some might claim naive -- view of humanity. They believed that man, being but "little lower than the angels," had the capacity to break or loosen the shackles of selfishness and demand what is good, fair and licit. What they could not foresee -- or even imagine -- was the relative ease with which a future generation of leaders would cynically convince the citizenry that the wearing of shackles is a stylish and good thing. I can imagine the Framers gagging on their respective quaffs as they contemplate the brazen lawlessness of the current administration. "How did it ever happen," they ask, "that our Constitution, THE PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTION, became little more than a soiled grease-rag?" "When," they demand to know, "when will the citizens wake up and take back the power that is inherently theirs?"

There are, I am happy to report, already some signs on the horizon that the American people are beginning to do just that. President Bush's "gift" to I. Lewis Libby -- the commutation of his 30-month prison sentence -- may have just provided the key to unlock the shackles which have held many Americans in thrall for far too long. According to a poll released just yesterday, an overwhelming majority of Democrats [60%] and -- unbelievably -- a plurality of Republicans [40%] oppose the president's latest ham-handed grab at power. It is finally dawning on the good citizens of the United States that we *are* a "nation of laws, not of men."

In breaking the camel's back with the straw of presumption, President Bush has likely condemned his party to the path of irrelevance. The shackles of selfishness are loosening; the veil of darkness is lifting; the spell of lawlessness is being broken. Does any of this matter to our president? From his words and demeanor, it would seem that the answer is "no." Those who see him on a daily basis, describe him as being "serene." He cares not a fig what anyone -- save a small cadre -- think about him or his administration. When asked how he thinks history will judge him, he shrugs, smirks and says " . . . they're still judging the first president. I don't think they're going to get around to forty-three any time soon." And this from a man with a history degree from Yale!

Despite the fact that the president and his henchmen have hijacked our Constitution and made of themselves a noxious vapor in the nostrils of both friend and foe alike, America the ideal -- and America the people -- are still held in high esteem. How is this possible? Its both possible and real because people from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe know that the United States of America is bigger, bolder and brighter than any man or administration. They sense -- even if they do not fully comprehend -- that in America, it is the people who grant authority to the leaders, and not the other way around. The American people will prevail; the gentlemen currently convening in the Divine parlor will once again have their way.

In the fifty-first chapter of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, the marvelously named "Mr. Bumble" tries to pawn off the guilt of a stolen locket onto his wife. When informed that in the eyes of the law he -- Mr. Bumble -- is the guiltier of the two [because the law assumes that his wife is under his direction], he gives voice to one of Dickens' most oft-quoted passages:

"If the law supposes that, the law is a ass -- a idiot. If that's the eye of the law, the law is a bachelor; and the worst I wish the law is, that his eye may be opened by experience -- by experience."

On this Fourth of July, as we celebrate this noble experiment called The United States of America, we might well amend Mr. Bumble's characterization. For in America, far from being "a ass," the law is "a asset."

Yes indeed, the law is "a asset," "oer the land of the free, and the home of the brave."

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July 04, 2007 in [Reflection](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 12, 2007

My God's Better Than Yours!

Permit me to begin with a confession: I am *not* a big fan of religious chauvinism. Nothing bothers me more than hearing someone -- whether that someone be Christian, Muslim, Jew or anything else -- claim that they have absolute certitude when it comes to knowing the mind and will of God. To my way of thinking, those possessing the gall, the temerity -- call it the *chutzpah* -- to proclaim that *their* religion is the one and only path to salvation, that theirs is only *true* religion, is . . . well, nothing short of a boor and God knows what else.

As a practicing Jew, I find it incredibly repugnant to hear someone proclaim that because I do not seek salvation through Jesus or Allah, I, my family, and lots and lots of people I cherish, love and greatly admire, are doomed to the fires of hell. More importantly, what does this say about the love, the mercy, the very benevolence God? That He -- or She -- is sanguine with consigning a vast majority of the people on Earth to the fiery abyss? I rather doubt it. My reading and understanding of the

Bible -- bolstered by more than 2,000 years of commentary -- points to a God who is vastly more concerned about how we live and act in This World. Then again, I belong to a religion, a people, who have always placed "the deed" far above "the creed."

Ask ten reasonably knowledgeable Jews "What does Judaism *believe* about X . . ." and you will likely be met with a bit of silence and the tugging of beards [well, at least for the men]. Ask those same ten reasonably knowledgeable Jews "What is a Jew supposed to *do* in situation X . . ." and you are likely to get a pretty quick response. Its the deed, far more than the creed.

I can state with absolute certainty that Judaism is the best religion in the world . . . for Jews. Then too, I believe that Islam is the best religion for Muslims, Christianity the best religion for Christians and so forth. What both galls and unnerves me are those folks who, claiming perfect understanding of Divine Will, trash the religious tenets and precepts of anyone who does not pray as they do.

"What," you may well ask, "brought on this temper tantrum?"

Cal Thomas, Pope Benedict XVI and Pat Buchanan, that's what.

First, dear delusional Cal.

In his July 10 column, Thomas went after Senator Hillary Clinton for saying she believed in the resurrection of Jesus even though "she described herself as less sure of the doctrine that

being a Christian is the only way to salvation." To this, Thomas had the *chutzpah* to assert, "This is a politician speaking, not a person who believes in the central tenets of Christianity." Thomas then went on to proclaim that a Christian cannot believe that "there are other ways to God than through Jesus."

OK, so admittedly, Cal Thomas is no fan of Senator Clinton. I am sure he would prefer to see anyone -- even Bela Lugosi -- in the Oval Office than Hillary. But where in the world does he come off denigrating her religious scruples or beliefs? Who made Cal Thomas the supreme judge? Is he really, truly comfortable damning Senator Clinton, along with billions of others? Seems to me that in the Bible that Thomas takes oh so literally, are the words of Matthew [King James version]: "*Judge not, that ye be not judged.*" Or again, in Luke, "*Do not judge, and ye will not be judged; and do not condemn, and ye will not be condemned; pardon, and ye will be pardoned.*"

Perhaps Cal was absent from Sunday school on the day those verses were being taught.

Thomas absolutely despises liberalism, whether it be in politics, economy, or of course, religion. To Cal's way of thinking, "Liberal faith, which is to say a faith that discounts the authority of Scripture in favor of a constantly evolving, poll-tested relevancy to modern concerns . . . ultimately morphs into societal and self-

improving efforts, and jettisons the life-changing message of salvation, forgiveness of sins and a transformed life."

Egad Cal, the senator is running for nomination, not beatification! And if you accuse Senator Clinton of being the one who first injected religion into the campaign, guess again. It was you, and your colleagues in the conservative media who have long been holding up that yardstick of morality. And come to think of it, what's so all-fire evil about "societal and self-improving efforts?" Isn't that part of the reason we were placed here on the planet in the first place? To bring Heaven and Earth a little closer together precisely through those "societal and self-improving efforts" that you so blithely condemn?

Go back to your corner Cal, its time to write a few words about Pope Benedict XVI, whom many capital-C Conservatives consider a Christian fraud. [I don't; remember, Catholicism is the best religion in the world . . . for Catholics].

Less than a week ago, the Pope issued a *motu proprio* [Latin for "of his own accord"], a decree authorizing wider use of the Latin mass. The Pope reasoned that this would bring about "greater unity within the Catholic Church." While one should probably take the Holy Father at his word, there is an ecclesiastic fly in the holy font: to wit, the Latin mass includes a Good Friday prayer calling for the conversion of the Jews. The Pope's *motu proprio* removed a rule that had required a bishop's permission

before the mass could be used. Now, the liturgy can be used on the authority of an individual parish priest.

If the Pope wants his flock to pray in Latin, fine. However, this means that tons and tons of Catholics are going to be worshipping in a language they don't understand. And, that they are going to be -- knowingly or not -- reviving a century's old imprecation against Jews. This nasty bit of business had originally been removed from Catholic worship in 1965, in then-Pope Paul VI's dictum, *Nostra Aetate*, the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions." In that declaration, Pope Paul VI wrote, "The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion." With a single dictum, Pope Benedict has effectively put back the heavenly sign that says "Only Catholics Need Apply."

Understandably, leaders of the Anti-Defamation League [ADL] have voiced grave concern. And predictably, their concern has been shunted aside by the likes of Pat Buchanan, who argued, "Indeed, if one believes, as devout Catholics do, that Christ and his Church hold the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, it would be anti-Semitic *not* to pray for the Jewish conversation [*sic*] of the Jews." In other words, "My God is better than yours!"

I've got news for you Cal, Pope Benedict and Pat: my God *is* your God. And visa-versa.

And by the way, from what I understand of the Christian Bible,
He's Jewish!

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July 12, 2007 in [Politics and Religion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 19, 2007

Once There Were Giants

First, a shameless plug -- an "advertisement for myself" -- to borrow a phrase from Norman Mailer. I am currently hard at work completing the new edition of *The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill*. And unless I fall victim to terminal writer's block, it will be published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2008. *The Congressional Minyan*, originally published back in 2001, is a chatty, compendious popular history of The United States as played out in the lives, times and accomplishments of the 184 Jewish men and women who have served in the United States Congress.

The research for this book has given me the opportunity to be an "eye witness" to virtually all of American history -- everything from the debates over war and peace to the fleeting tide of popular culture. It contains episodes on famous scandals and trials, long-forgotten demagogues and political powerhouses, and musings on everyone from Mark Twain, Jane Austen and John Cheever to Babe Ruth and Sir Charles Chaplin. Its a heck of a lot of work, but a hell of a lot of fun. Hey, I can't play shortstop and I'm a lousy dancer. So I write . . .

The most depressing lesson I've learned while banging out my five to six thousand words a day, is that in so many American arenas, competence, compassion, and collegiality have been replaced by crass competition. And where once the Oval Office, Capitol Hill and the courts were peopled with far-sighted giants who understood the definition of "commonweal," today we find ourselves led by political pygmies whose only allegiance is to winning. Perhaps at no time since the so-called "Gilded Age" has American leadership been in such thrall to wealth. Where once people like Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, Truman, Norris, Javits, LaGuardia, Brandeis, Warren, Berle and Hopkins [*if you don't know who all these guys were, read the book!*] led and helped shape America, today we are saddled with the likes of Bush, Cheney, McConnell, Lott, Graham, [Clarence] Thomas and Rove, to name but a few.

In the media, there was a time when articulate, sober-sided professionals like Liebling, Lippmann, Sinclair and I.F. Stone [sorry, no relation] could be counted on to use their literary scalpels against virtually anyone, regardless of party. They knew an albatross when they saw one. Today we are beset with blow-dried journalistic wannabes like Hannity, O'Reilly, [Cal] Thomas and Goldberg -- hacks whose partisanship is almost as obvious as the obeisance they show corporate bosses who pay them their hefty salaries.

This "assault of the pygmies" has led to our inability to solve problems, move forward or even engage in constructive badinage. Witness the recent testimony of Richard H. Carmona, the former Surgeon General of the United States. Carmona, a former Army Special Forces medic, hospital chief executive and university professor, told a House hearing last week that the vetting of his official pronouncements *"was done by political appointees who were specifically there to be able to spin . . . my words in such a way that would be preferable to a political or an ideologically preconceived notion that had nothing to do with science."*

Carmona further reported that when the issue of global warming came up with senior White House officials, "they were heralding global warming to be nothing more than . . . a liberal cause and had no merit." He also testified that he was chastised by these same political appointees for "not mentioning President Bush more often in his public pronouncements." When he was told that the president's name should be mentioned "at least three times on every page," he told them, "I'm not going to do that!"

God bless you Dr. Carmona. Its just too bad you had to wait until you were out of office until the smarmy details could be revealed.

Transmuting scientific fact with the reagent of partisanship is intellectually dishonest at best, politically venal at worst. It shows the administration's total disregard for anything other than

maintaining an edge; for delivering a "truth" that is acceptable to the interests that put it in power in the first place. The "giants" of an earlier age would never have stooped to such depths.

Then there is Iraq. More than 60% of the American public favors troop withdrawal; a majority in both the House and Senate concur. But despite this, nothing gets done. The obvious question is "why?" The Senate's recently concluded "allnighter" offers, if not an answer, at least a glimpse. Everyone is jockeying for the most politically advantageous position; one that has the best chance of pinning the tail of incompetence and lack of patriotism on the other party's rear end. Hey, aren't they suppose to be doing something about winding down the conflict? A conflict the vast majority of them believe -- at least off the record -- has been mishandled and mismanaged for years?

The Senate's all night session was supposed to force a vote on the Levin-Reed proposal; a measure that would begin the slow process of troop withdrawal or reassignment. The Democrats called for an "up-or-down vote, a simple majority of 51. The Republicans counter-demanded a "super majority" -- 60 votes. The Democrats vainly reminded their colleagues across the aisle that when the GOP was in control, *they* were the one's who treated up-and-down votes as sacrosanct dicta from Mt. Sinai. What a difference an election makes!

If the bone-weary senators were really, truly, concerned about our troops, the "War on Terror" [remember that phrase?] and

security at home, the outcome would have been a lot different. But no; the real concern seems to have been just who will receive future blame. I have no doubt that Republicans are willing to let the war go on -- and on and on -- until Democrats capture the White House in '08. In that way, they reason, it will be the Democrats -- and not the Republicans -- who will be blamed for the incredible mess that withdrawal will no doubt cause.

In other words, politics first; what's best for our troops and the American people second. Partisan advantage first; progress second.

In a day when leaders cannot agree on what is sensible policy; when an administration places ideology above scientific fact; when the government cannot even figure out how to use millions of tons of stored ice, it makes one long for that time when giants once roamed the streets of this great nation.

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July 19, 2007 in [Reflection](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 26, 2007

Bush's Tush

One sure barometer of a president's -- or senator's or governor's -- standing with the public is the quantity, quality and creativity of bumper stickers, posters, slogans and what used to be called "Guerrilla Theater." To my way of thinking, these products and activities are often more accurate -- and definitely more entertaining -- than scientifically-conducted public opinion polls.

A few examples of my favorites from yesteryear:

- During the 1964 presidential race, there was a best-selling button that had Senator Barry Goldwater's smiling face surmounted with the words, "In Your Guts You Know He's Nuts!"
- Back in the late 1960s, when then-California Governor Ronald Reagan was making a name for himself as the first line of defense against anti-war protesters at Berkley, there was a fast-selling poster that proclaimed, "Impeach Bonzo and his Buddy!"
- During the 1968 presidential election, Dick Tuck, the late "Clown Prince of Politics," lined up several dozen obviously

pregnant women at a train siding, all holding placards proclaiming, "Nixon's the One!"

In my more than 40 years as a political junkie, I cannot recall a time or a president who has garnered more buttons, bumper stickers or slogans than George W. Bush. A brief sampling of some of the best will tell you why the man's public *disapproval* rating is at 65% and rising:

- "If you can read this, you're not President Bush!"
- "Don't blame me, I voted with the majority!"
- "The last time we listened to a Bush, we wandered in the desert for 40 years!"
- "1/20/09: End of an Error."

Even your's truly has gotten into the act:

*"The **good news** is that the five tiny growths recently removed from Bush's tush were benign.*

*The **bad news** is that they were his five remaining brain cells!"*

All humor aside, these barbs and quips underscore a chilling reality: that a vast majority of the American public now see the president for the mendacious, power-grabbing, unconscionably Constitution-defying puppet he is. The laundry-list of complaints and charges against President Bush are longer than Yao Ming's arm, more dangerous than Lindsay Lohan behind the wheel of a Mercedes

Benz.

The question now becomes, "What in the world can we do about it?" Calls for the impeachment and conviction of Bush [and Cheney] are an Internet staple. Hardly a day goes by in which I don't receive some electronic petition to the effect that the President and his Vice must go -- now. Across the country, hamlets and town councils are passing symbolic resolutions calling for his removal. Last April, the Vermont Senate joined the act, citing the President's mishandling of the war in Iraq as the reason he should be removed.

In the House, Rep. Dennis Kucinich [D-Oh] has introduced articles of impeachment against the Vice President -- H.R. 333. As of a couple of days ago, his resolution has 10 co-sponsors, 3 of whom sit on the House Judiciary Committee.

The Republican public spin on all this impeachment talk is predictable: "Politics as usual;" "The Democrats are trying to hide the fact that they can't get anything done;" "What do you expect from Vermont?" Privately, Republicans are worried -- damn worried. All but the most brain-dead understand that George W. Bush is going to be the 600-pound albatross of the 2008 election; a dead weight that threatens to drag them down to defeat. This is one of the major reason why "none of the above" is leading in all the current Republican presidential polls.

As much as I would love to see Bush, Cheney, Gonzo and the rest impeached, convicted and sent off to summer camp, I know it's never going to happen. As much as I may understand the public

push for a "day of reckoning" for all of this administration's high crimes, misdemeanors and misdeeds, I cannot go along with impeachment. Do they deserve to be called on the carpet, tried and convicted? Absolutely. Is there a smarter way to go? Absolutely. In a word: censure.

It strikes me that censuring both George W. Bush and Dick Cheney is the most intelligent way to go. And for at least five reasons:

- It would give both the man and his administration a stamp of utter disapproval. Why wait for history's verdict when we can write it now?
- Passing a resolution of censure does not involve all the thousands of hours and tens of millions of dollars that would be wasted in a futile attempt at achieving the virtually impossible.
- Unlike impeachment, which would be an impossible pill for Senate Republicans to swallow, censure is something that some just may feel comfortable going along with. It is a way for them to score points with the voting public for doing the right thing without feeling that they have "caved in" to their effete, left-leaning, latte-drinking colleagues across the aisle.
- It would free Congress to concentrate on far, far more important, doable measures.
- It just might embolden Congress to override a veto or two.

Political junkies from Maine to California know that there already is a censure resolution on the table. It is sponsored by

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russ Feingold, one of the clearest-sighted, most courageous people currently serving on Capitol Hill. The genius of Feingold's censure resolution is that it is narrowly drawn. It contains 12 "Whereas" clauses and but a single "be it resolved" conclusion. To wit:

Resolved: That the United States Senate does hereby censure George W. Bush, President of the United States, and does condemn his unlawful authorization of wiretaps of Americans within the United States without obtaining the court orders required by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, his failure to inform the full congressional intelligence committees as required by law, and his efforts to mislead the American people about the authorities relied upon by his Administration to conduct wiretaps and about the legality of the program.

What? Nothing about how he snookered us into war in Iraq with bogus claims about "weapons of mass destruction?" Not a word about his giving massive tax breaks to the super-wealthy while turning a blind eye to the victims of Hurricane Katrina? No reference to his tortured misuse of "Executive Privilege?" Why no mention of all the other assorted lies, idiocies and downright inanities that we the people have had to suffer these past six-and-a-half-years?

The answer is simple: none of the above are either impeachable or, strictly speaking, censurable offenses. While Senator Feingold's narrow, legalistic wording may not fulfill our emotional need for

conviction, it can satisfy our intellectual conviction that history must understand just how bad this administration was. By passing a resolution of censure, people for all time will know what we know today.

And speaking of history's verdict, perhaps one day Carl Rove will be remembered not as "Bush's Brain," but rather "Bush's Tush."

If that ever happens, I want the credit . . .

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 02, 2007

Nazi? . . . Schmatzi!

Readers of this Blog will recall that on occasion, I've made reference to my old math professor, Tom Lehrer, one of the English language's best topical satirists. He is best known for such musical howls as "The Vatican Rag," "Pollution," and "New Math."

I've had Professor Lehrer on the brain the past couple of days. And no, not the class I took from him -- "Math for Tenors." Rather, a particular song he wrote back in 1965 about German rocket scientist Werner Von Braun. It opened with the words:

"Gather 'round while I sing you of Werner Von Braun,

A man whose allegiance is owed to expedience.

Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown,

'Nazi? Schmazti!' says Werner Von Braun."

The gates to memory began opening the first time I heard "Fixed Noise's" [Fox News] Bill O'Reilly liken the liberal political Blog, "The Daily Kos," to Al Capone, Benito Mussolini, the K.K.K. and incredibly, the Nazis. During the July 19 edition of "The O'Reilly

Factor," the pseudo Journalist-cum-Voice-of-American-Values proclaimed, "[T]he hate this site traffics in, rivals the KKK and Nazi websites." On July 24, O'Reilly mused, "What's the difference between David Duke and the stuff he [Kos] puts out on his website . . . what's the difference?"

The gates opened well past the halfway point when I heard radio talker Michael Savage compare the firing of Don Imus to "what was done in Nazi Germany to Jews." Shame on you Michael; how in the name of all that's sane, holy or fair could a man born *Michael Alan Weiner* make such a hateful, asinine statement? And then, to top it off, a couple of days later you mused aloud, "You're telling me there's no possibility of a conspiracy by the Democrats to have caused [Chief Justice John Roberts'] seizure in some manner? Tell me it's not possible and I'll call you a liar."

The gates flew completely off the hinges when, on July 31, Rush Limbaugh referred to Democrats as ". . . media spokespersons for *Al Qaeda*." "They [Democrats] have aligned themselves with the enemy," Limbaugh told his adoring, cerebrally challenged ditto-heads. "They continue to align themselves with the enemy. They just won't admit it."

AAARGH!

Or, to quote P.G. Wodehouse, "HEAVEN'S WHISKERS!"

Whatever happened to Voltaire's maxim, "I may not agree with you, but I'll defend your right to say it?" Since when in America did mere disagreement merit such unbridled heat, hatred and opprobrium? Has the "Daily Kos" really murdered more than six million Jews and a like number of gypsies, homosexuals and academics? Are those who are of the opinion that Don Imus was way off base in referring to members of the Rutgers Women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos" really guilty of crimes against humanity? Are all the good people who think our war in Iraq has been a colossal blunder really, truly allied with Osama bin Laden?

Of course not.

So why all the *uber*-hyperbole? Do *supposedly* intelligent, thoughtful people like O'Reilly [M.P.A., Harvard], Savage [Ph.D., Berkley], Coulter [J.D., *Order of the Coif*, Michigan], Limbaugh, Hannaty, Beck and the rest truly believe all the bilge they spew forth on a daily basis? I sincerely doubt it. In a strange, twisted way though, I would rest a bit easier if they *really did* believe all the bilge. At least then, we could send in a phalanx of physicians who would take their pulse, administer saliva tests and get them the therapy they so desperately need.

But the fact of the matter is that they *don't* believe 99% of what they tell their audiences. As a card-carrying cynic, I am duty-bound to explain the obvious: they make their idiotic, mind-numbing, possibly slanderous statements for the sake of -- you

guessed it -- RATINGS. And even here, they are beginning to lose both credibility and traction.

So, at best, Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Hannaty *et al* are media pimps. At worst, they are incredibly, diabolically, pernicious. Likening *anyone* in American public life to Hitler, Mussolini or bin Laden trivializes their ghastly inhumanity, and makes a clever sound-byte out of genocide. Such characterizations and referents make words like "Nazi," "Fascist," "Terrorist" or "Conspirator" virtually devoid of meaning. To ponder before an open mike whether Democrats are somehow responsible for the Chief Justice's seizure is not just irresponsible; it is pathetic. But hey, I am, in most respects, still a fan of Voltaire; I loathe what you're saying, but will [*sigh*] defend your right to say it. And by the way, Justice Roberts' seizure was *idiopathic*, which means "of unknown origin," and not, as you would have your listeners or viewers believe, "caused by idiots."

In recent years, American politics -- which has always involved a certain amount of jab, thrust and parry -- has mutated into a full-contact, no-holds-barred melee; a classic, gladiatorial "the ends justify the means" form of warfare. What we have *gained* from this mutation, this war of hateful words and purposive rebuke is highly questionable. What we have *lost* is obvious: our ability to admit or understand the humanity of those with whom we disagree.

We close with the second stanza of Tom Lehrer's ode to Dr. Braun. For here, we find what I fear is the underlying attitude of all those media figures who continually drop verbal buzz-bombs on the soil of American credibility:

"Some say that he's hypocritical,

Rather, say that he's apolitical.

'Vunce 'da rockets go up

Who cares vhere day come down?

Dat's not my department,'

Says Werner Von Braun."

August 02, 2007 in [On the Media](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)
July 26, 2007

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 09, 2007

The Agony of Victory . . . The Thrill of Defeat

While much of the nation's attention has been focused on San Francisco Giant slugger Barry Bonds' now-completed quest of the all-time Home Run Record*, Congress has managed to pass S. 1927, a bill that further dices and slices this nation's historic Constitutional safeguards. What Bonds has accomplished already has an a*s*t*e*r*i*s*k. What the Congress has done ought to be condemned.

For Mr. Bonds, the magic number was 756; for Congress the numbers were 60 in the Senate, and 227 in the House. In the case of the former, 756 represented home runs; in the latter, cowardice and capitulation. For "60" and "227" represent, respectively, the number of Senators and Representatives who voted to grant a six-month extension of the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Act [F.I.S.A.] of 1978. In so doing, the House and Senate have granted an even greater degree of untrammelled, unfettered power to President Bush. That is to say, that for at least the next six months, the Bush Department of Justice, under the "leadership" of the "Perjurer General," Alberto Gonzales, will continue having the ability to conduct warrantless eavesdropping

on any conversation it so chooses, whether it be via telephone email or semaphore, for all we know. The president and Mr. Gonzales, of course, assure us that if we aren't communicating with terrorists, we have nothing to fear; these wiretaps are, they aver, meant to preserve our freedom and liberty by raking in as much intelligence as humanly possible against those who would do us harm. In other words, if America is going to continue spreading freedom and liberty abroad, it first must take a rapier to the Constitution at home.

Got that twisted logic?

Trusting President Bush with this expanded wiretap authority -- and believing that he will never, ever abuse our Constitutional rights -- is akin to trusting Mr. Bonds with the key to the drug cabinet at a local Walgreens. The most feeble-minded sports fan would never trust Bonds in the latter case. And yet, the geniuses of Congress have endorsed precisely that sort of trust in the former.

It comes as little surprise that every Senate Republican voted in favor of S.1927; how could they go against the leader of their party? And in the House, only two members of the GOP -- Tim Johnson of Illinois and Walter Jones of North Carolina -- had the guts to say "Nuts!" and vote against the bill. To them we say *yeshar koach* -- Yiddish for "hip hip hurray!"

What does come as a shock are all those Democratic senators and representatives who, quaking in their collective boots, handed the White House a signal victory. I thought that when we, the people, voted the Democrats back into control of Congress, we were sending a clear-cut message: to wit, no more letting the White House get away with whatever it wants -- no matter how patently unconstitutional -- in the name of "National Security." No more politics of utter fear; a return to the politics of hope. And yet, last Friday's vote clearly demonstrates that fear -- the fear of recrimination, the fear of being labeled "soft on terror" -- still reigns supreme on Capitol Hill.

Shame on the Quislings of Congress, you, 16 Senate and 41 House Democrats who voted in favor of fear and against the Constitution of the United States. Does nothing matter but your reelection? Just how far are you willing to go to ensure you won't be rejected by voters in the next election? By what logic can you ever justify your vote?

S.1927 was supposed to repair a glitch in the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which requires the government to obtain a warrant before eavesdropping on electronic communications that involve someone in the United States. The court charged with enforcing that law said the government must also seek a warrant if the people are outside the country, but their communications are routed through "data exchanges" here -- something that did not exist in 1978.

Instead of fixing this glitch, the White House railroaded Congress -- with the craven acquiescence of those 16 senators and 41 representatives -- into voting a vast expansion of the president's powers. S.1927 gives the Director of National Intelligence and the Attorney General authority to intercept -- without warrant, court supervision or accountability -- any telephone call or email message that move in, out of or through of the United States as long as there is a "reasonable belief" that one party is not in the United States.

Who's to say what will become of civil liberty in America? Its bad enough that Congress passed this egregious bill. What's worse is that at no time did any Democratic leader seek to explain to the American people just how bad, how truly dangerous this legislation is. Instead, they handed the president a pernicious gift and then skulked off on their summer holiday.

It seems that in politics -- as in professional sports -- winning isn't just everything, its the *only* thing. In the world of sports, victory always has a tangible end -- a pennant, a trophy, and all the bragging rights one can stomach. In politics, victory is not nearly so tangible; its supposed to a *means* to an end -- a better, safer, more educated, better-housed, better-nourished, and freer citizenry.

There is an ironic similarity between Barry Bonds' ill-starred Home Run Record* and the passage of S1927: in both cases, the principles presume that the public is puerile, or, in the words of

Grandpa Doc, that "The masses are asses." In the case of Mr. Bonds, he presumes that we are so stupid we cannot connect the dots and conclude that without question, he cheated; that his last 250 to 300 home runs were steroid-induced laser shots. Then again, perhaps he just doesn't give a fig; he's got \$50 million in the bank so what the heck.

In the case of Congress, it would seem that they are also of a belief that we, the American people, are stupid; that we are so politically comatose that we will continue electing them no matter what they do or how they vote; that all they have to do is point to the specter of terror in order to get our votes and emerge as victors. But what is the purpose of political victory? To sew seeds for the next campaign by not ruffling feathers? Or is it to take that victory and turn it into something positive for the future of this country? I fear that for many, the seeds of tomorrow's political victory far outweigh the challenges of the present.

I challenge all those Democrats who favored \$.1927 to go back to their districts or states and explain their vote; to talk turkey with the public. Explain to us how a vote giving even greater power to an irresponsible, already power-mad executive branch is going to make us safer. Explain to us how tapping in to billions of email messages -- a project that will take a couple of decades -- is more important than securing American ports, railroads and

airports? Explain to us why you aren't acting like Democrats. Talk to us as if we were adults!

As a nation of sports fans, it is undoubtedly the case that far more Americans are aware of Barry Bonds' Home Run Record* than the sorry record of the Democratically-controlled 110th Congress.

As a nation of sports fans, we understand the vast chasm between the "thrill of victory" and the "agony of defeat."

The passage of S1927 is however, precisely the opposite: a victory which agonizes.

Its future defeat -- now *that* will be a thrill.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 16, 2007

A Rove By Any Other Name . . .

Every year, beginning about the first of August, Annie starts asking me "What do you want for your birthday?" And every year, without fail, I give her the same answer:

1. Peace in the Middle East
2. An end to poverty and hunger
3. A cooler, healthier planet, and
4. The Dodgers taking the pennant.

I'm reasonably certain I won't be receiving any of these gifts next week; the Middle East is still a bubbling cauldron, the poor still can't afford a balanced diet, its hotter than the hinges of Hades, and the Dodgers are playing like a bunch of dyspeptic lizards. Ironically, though, I *have* already received one gift that wasn't on my list: the resignation of Karl Rove.

Ah, Karl Rove. The man the press dubbed Bush "Bush's Brain," and the president lovingly [?] referred to as "Turd Blossom," is leaving his White House post at the end of the month. Not only is this a gift to yours truly; it is an answer to the prayer of every Democrat from Anchorage to Altamonte Springs. For more than

thirty years, Karl Rove has been the malevolent epicenter of George W. Bush's political world; the man who created the hollow term "compassionate conservative," and more than most, is responsible for the current political muddle that is the Republican Party.

Rove's Svengali-like hold on George W. Bush had everything to do with campaign strategy. It had less than nothing to do with governance. From day one, Rove's dream was to create a Republican dynasty for the ages. What he has likely done in reality, is to hand back the mantle of authority to the heirs of FDR. Most national Republicans understand what Rove has wrought; how many of the current crop of GOP presidential hopefuls have thrown encomia his way? The answer is both brief and simple: none. And, to the best of my knowledge, not one member of the House or Senate has weighed in with a "I come not to bury Caesar but to praise him" speech on his behalf.

Rove's "genius" -- if indeed there was one -- was akin to that of Marcus Alonzo Hanna, the man credited with running the first modern presidential campaign back in 1896. Hanna [1837-1904] got his man, William B. McKinley ensconced in the White House -- at the then mind-boggling cost of \$4 million -- by tailoring issues to fit various constituencies. And like Rove, Hanna never understood that when the campaign ends, governance begins. Hanna had McKinley repay his well-heeled supporters by upholding the gold standard and keeping tariffs incredibly high.

His Republican dynasty lasted sixteen years, thanks in large measure to McKinley's death and the ascension of Teddy Roosevelt.

Then too, there has always been something of Harry M. Daugherty about Karl Rove. Daugherty [1860-1941] was the leader of the so-called "Ohio Gang" that created the abysmal -- though extremely handsome -- Warren G. Harding. Daugherty, so the story goes, convinced Harding that his best qualification for becoming president was that he *looked like* a president! Daugherty's campaign strategy for Harding was deceptively simple: keep it affable, stay neutral, and bang the drum for "normalcy." [Note: the word was supposed to be "normality," but Harding had as much difficulty with its pronunciation as George W. Bush has with the word "nuclear."] Harding, of course, would oversee one of the most corrupt, lackluster administrations in American history.

The Platonic absolute of presidential brains would be FDR's mentor, Louis McHenry Howe. Howe [1871-1936] first met FDR in 1911, and recognizing raw political talent when he saw it, began advising the young New York patrician. Howe stood at Roosevelt's side through the disastrous presidential election of 1920, FDR's polio, and his two terms as New York Governor. More importantly, it was Howe who gave FDR his awareness and *penchant* for social and economic justice. So strong was their relationship, that when FDR was elected in 1932, he brought his

elfin adviser to live with him and Eleanor at the White House. Moreover, it was Howe, who perhaps more than any other member of Roosevelt's "Kitchen Cabinet," who put the words "New Deal" on the lips -- and in the heart -- of the president.

And then there is Karl Rove.

One must, in all fairness, give Rove his due in getting Bush elected both Texas Governor and President of the United States. I mean, if elections are won in part via one's resume, Bush wouldn't have stood a snowball's chance in Baghdad. And, if victory goes to him -- or her -- that has a facility for, a grace with, speaking the language, Bush would still be managing partner of the Texas Rangers. [Note: Prior to entering politics, Bush's epitaph looked like it was going to one day read "He was the man who traded Sammy Sosa."] In sum, one must admire the fact that Rove got him elected in the first -- and second, third and fourth -- place.

But that is not what history is going to remember about Karl Rove. He will be remembered for authoring the failed concept known as the "Ownership Society." He will be remembered as the man who pushed for the privatization of retirement accounts, the "No Child Left Behind" fiasco, cutting taxes in the midst of a war, the Medicare Drug Prescription swindle, and the atrocity known as "Immigration Reform." He will be remembered as being the reincarnation of Lee Atwater, the man who first figured out that catering to the Religious Right made good political sense. I hope

and pray he will be remembered for playing fast and loose with the truth, and for almost single-handedly destroying the national Republican Party.

Rove is departing his post not with a whimper, but with a bang. Already, he has lobbed a grenade at Senator Hillary Clinton -- "She's fatally flawed" -- and scored Democrats for being weak on terror. In his recent radio love fest with Rush Limbaugh, Rove was simply "aghast" at how partisan the Democrats are now that they control Congress. If that's the case, then why oh why did all those partisan Democrats pass the FISA extension? And why isn't there any troop reduction on the horizon?

Karl, you're no Louis Howe. You never figured out, like Howe, that campaigns have little to do with governance. You're a pinch of Marc Hanna, a dollop of Harry Daugherty, and more than a skosh of Lee Atwater. And that's nothing to be proud of.

I hope that the next president --whoever he or she may be -- will have their brain on top of their shoulders and not in an office down the hall.

Having said all this, thanks Karl, you've given me a great birthday present.

Now if there was just something we could do about the Middle East, poverty, global warming and those damned Dodgers . . .

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 22, 2007

Waiting for Fred

Nearly sixty years ago, Irish novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett took precisely 16 weeks to write, polish and publish *Waiting for Godot*, which many critics consider to be "the most significant English language play of the 20th century." The tragicomedy, whose very title has become a watchword for eternal patience and frustration, is actually Beckett's own translation of the work he originally wrote in French -- *En attendant Godot*.

Waiting for Godot is a strange two-act, five character play consisting of a simple plot, an even simpler *mise en scene*, and lots and lots of dialog. The play follows two consecutive days in the lives of two old tramps -- Vladimir and Estragon -- who are waiting by a leafless tree for the arrival of M. Godot. Although both claim that Godot is an acquaintance, the fact is that they hardly know him; they eventually admit they wouldn't recognize him if they saw him. And so, they wait; they quarrel, make up, contemplate suicide, try to sleep, eat a carrot, and gnaw on some chicken bones. At the end of the second day, a young boy

arrives, and informs them not to expect Godot; perhaps he will come tomorrow.

The two again consider suicide, but their rope, which served as Estragon's belt, is not up to the job. His trousers fall down, which he doesn't notice until Vladimir tells him to pull them up. The play ends with the pair resolving to bring a more suitable piece and hang themselves the next day . . . if Godot fails to arrive.

Oh yes, by the end of the play, it is still totally unclear just who this Godot fellow is. Even Beckett didn't know.

So what does Beckett's masterpiece have to do with "Waiting for Fred," the title of this week's piece? And just *who* in the name of Judge Crater *is* this fellow Fred? Why former Tennessee Senator -- and about-to-become-former "Law and Order" D.A. -- Fred Thompson, that's who.

Like Vladimir and Estragon, Republicans, pollsters and pundits are all waiting, waiting, waiting for Senator Fred to announce his candidacy for president. And, like Beckett's two tramps, no one really knows just what to expect. For like Godot, Thompson is more mythic than real; a white knight on a charging steed. And like Beckett, they really aren't sure who Fred Thompson is.

This last statement might seem strange, considering that Thompson has been in the public eye for the better part of 35 years. Part of his appeal is obvious: he's not McCain, Romney,

Guiliani or the rest of the pack. He's a well-known actor and carries with him, in the words of the *New Republic's* Michelle Cottle, ". . . an inherent star quality that cannot be overestimated in our celebrity-obsessed culture." Moreover, Cottle notes, "After years of portraying a particular type of folksy authority figure, Thompson gives voters the sense that they already know who he is and what sort of leader he would be."

At this point in campaign season, Thompson possesses a touch of the "blank-slate" phenomenon. This allows savior-hungry Republicans to project onto him whatever personal and ideological traits they most desire. It would seem that what Republicans see most in Thompson is that which he has always portrayed on the screen: a no-nonsense, *uber*-masculine, two-fisted, scotch-drinking kind of guy who talks the talk and isn't afraid to kick a few butts.

Never truly driven by ambition, Thompson has admitted that "I have never beaten down a lot of doors in my life. Occasionally, doors have opened to me, and I had sense enough to see they were opening." Senator Howard Baker, Thompson's first gatekeeper, helped him land a position as assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee. After working on Baker's 1972 reelection campaign, Thompson hit the big time: he was appointed to serve as minority counsel on the Watergate hearings. While Thompson didn't show himself to be the second coming of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. he did make a national

splash when he famously asked White House aide Alexander Butterfield whether he knew of any listening devices in the Oval Office. For days and weeks, Thompson's "droopy-dog" six-foot-five inch frame was broadcast into living rooms from Maine to California.

From there, it was but a quick hop to Hollywood, where, over the next twenty years, he perfected his public persona as the face and voice of institutional authority in films such as *No Way Out* [Director of the CIA], *The Hunt for Red October* [a rear admiral], and *In the Line of Fire*, where he played the White House Chief of Staff. In 1994, Baker opened yet another door by convincing Thompson to run for the United States Senate seat that Al Gore was vacating in order to become Vice President. Despite being portrayed by his opponent -- Congressman Jim Cooper -- as a "Gucci-wearing, Lincoln-driving, Perrier-drinking . . . Washington special interest lobbyist," Thompson won the race by 20 points.

Thompson's eight years as senator offer little insight as to what sort of leader he might be in the real world. His rep on Capitol Hill was that of a prodigious ladies' man who enjoyed living the good life and disdained the particulars of legislation, fund-raising or politicking. As one political writer has noted, "Fred Thompson left few footprints on the sands of Capitol Hill."

In essence, Thompson's appeal is the appeal of Ronald Reagan: men whose personae are suffused with the aroma of contraband

cigars and English Leather. Like Reagan, what we "know" about Thompson comes almost exclusively from the roles he played on the silver screen and TV. Like Reagan, he is portrayed as a man more at home in jeans and boots than custom-tailored suits. Like the late president, Thompson is a man who chooses to involve himself only in the "big picture," and, for the most part, disdains the minutia of policy. And like "Old Dutch," his political engine is fueled by a wife who is far, far more ambitious than he.

So let the Republican rank-and-file pine for Thompson the way Vladimir and Estragon waited for Godot. It all adds up to the same thing: they don't know if he will ever come, and aren't sure they will even recognize him should he arrive. And like Beckett, they don't even know precisely who he is. If they are willing to wait upon an image instead of an individual, that is indubitably their choice.

Toward the end of Act II, Pozzo, a man who happens upon the luckless two informs them: *"I don't remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow, I won't remember having met anyone today. So don't count on me to enlighten you."*

Or, as the old saying goes, *Omni momento nascitur stultis* -- "There's a sucker born every minute."

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August 22, 2007 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 30, 2007

April's Not The "Cruellest Month" Anymore

I don't know if George W. Bush ever studied or read any T.S. Elliot when he was an undergrad at Yale. After all, Elliot [1888-1965] was a Harvard man, not an Eli. If not, then George missed out on the chance of immersing himself in some indelibly muscular, intelligent poetry; poetry that taught more than a few profound truths. If W. *had* managed to read or study any of the Nobel Prize winner's most memorable pieces, he would likely have remembered the opening verse to Elliot's depressive *magnum opus*, "The Wasteland:"

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

I don't know if the president considers April to be "the cruellist month" [Yes, *Elliot, a world-class Anglophile, did spell the word "cruellist" in the British manner*]; I do know that August hasn't been all that kind to him. Consider what the past four weeks hath wrought:

- The loss of his "brain," Karl Rove
- The resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez
- The two-year anniversary of Katrina
- The possibly foreseeable mining disaster in Utah
- The I-35W Mississippi River bridge collapse in southeast Minnesota
- The forced "retirement" of Arizona Representative Rick Renzi
- The announcement that former Speaker Dennis Hastert would not seek reelection due to questionable ethics
- Congressional investigations on virtually everything under the sun
- The news that General Petraeus' long-awaited surge assessment has actually been vetted -- if not written -- by the White House political staff
- The ethical cloud surrounding Alaska Senator Ted Stevens
- The Senator Larry ["I'm NOT Gay"] Craig scandal

Of course, July wasn't too kind either; last month was the scandal in which another champion of "family values" -- Louisiana

Senator David Vitter -- was found to be frequently frequenting those whom Shakespeare delicately referred to as "victims of frail sisterhood."

I would imagine that in retrospect, April never looked so good.

For most partisan Democrats -- and more than a few independents -- all of the above could easily -- and understandably -- make for one long, sustained guffaw of glee . . . "Just wait for November 2008, we'll show all those holier-than-thou hypocrites who's boss!" Yes indeed, the blood, as they say, is definitely in the water. But that kind of response, although perhaps understandable, would be wrong -- terribly wrong. And for at two reasons:

First, political scandal and embarrassment tends to swing on an eternal pendulum. This week, this month, this year, the muck and mire is sticking to the Republicans. But just as sure as God made little green apples, the pendulum of perversity will one day swing back and begrime the Democrats. Need proof? When queried about Senator Stevens' ethical lapses, Republicans lash out viscerally and viciously with "and what about the ninety grand stashed away in William Jefferson's freezer?" When faced with the Larry Craig scandal, Republicans mouth the words "Barney Frank," and "Gerry Studds. And in exchange for Senator Vitter and his trollops, the Republicans bring up the catch-words "I did not have sex with that woman," and "Monica Lewinsky."

Second, what one might call "The Steve Irwin Factor." Irwin, you will recall, was TV's "Crocodile Hunter," who suffered a tragic death at the "hands" of a frightened stingray. If nothing else, Irwin's death should serve to remind us that there is nothing more dangerous, more lethal than a frightened or wounded animal. And if nothing else, George W. Bush and his cohorts are both.

In the past several days, we have seen and heard the president make comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam; vainly trying to convince us that a precipitous withdrawal from the former will inevitably lead to the carnage of the latter. It would seem that what he is laboring to say is that just as we should have remained in Vietnam a lot longer, so too should we remain in the Iraq a lot longer. This is indeed a frightening prospect. But wait, there's something even worse.

The president has also been ratcheting up the rhetoric against Iran, issuing warnings of dire consequences if they will not "mend their ways." Unless I am like the Who's "Tommy" -- that "deaf, dumb and blind kid" -- what he is gearing up for is yet another war. This is enough to make even the most ardent teetotaler want to down two or three dozen fingers of Glen Garioch, Glenfiddich or Glenfarclas. Is the man mad? Has he lost all sense of reason? Or is he, like the proverbial wounded animal, lashing out in a feral attempt at self-preservation?

One might assume that a man who has been suffering his own "cruellest month" might have the sense, the decency to tone down the swagger; might recognize that he is indeed, the lamest of lame ducks. But no. The president still has a few aces up his sleeve, a few more arrows left in the executive quiver. If ever there was a time to make our voices heard, the time is now. We must -- through ever channel at our disposal -- remind Congress that they have the power to remove Bush's aces, to break his arrows . . . to finally take the lead in restoring a modicum of sanity.

More and more, I hear a haunting Bob Dylan refrain rattling about in my brain:

When you've got nothin', you've got nothin' to lose

You're invisible now, you've got no secrets to confuse . . .

So laugh all you like. Point all the derisive fingers you wish. Compare Bush *et al* to Elliot's Hollow Men,

". . . the stuffed men

Leaning together,

Headpiece filled with straw

Shape without form,

Shade without colour,

Paralyzed force, gesture without motion."

Laugh all you want, but do remember that whatever the "cruellest month" may be, it spares no one.

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 07, 2007

Kicking Ass

Once upon a time, leaders were larger than life; men and women of vision, insight, and eloquence. Once upon a time, leaders had about them an air of nobility, and more often than not, made their fellow countrymen proud. They knew how to uplift; they knew how to inspire. Once upon a time we had leaders who could make deft use of the king's [or queen's] English.

Consider the following:

- *"Arbitrary power is most easily established on the ruins of liberty abused to licentiousness."* George Washington -- Farewell Address, 1788.
- *"I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."* T. Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 1800.
- *"Government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth."* A. Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, Nov. 19, 1863.
- *"We have nothing to fear but fear itself."* FDR, 1st Inaugural Address, March 1933.

- *"We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets, and on the hills."* Sir Winston Churchill, speech before House of Commons, June 4, 1940.
- *"As not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."* JFK, Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1961.

Now, compare this to the latest *bon mot* coming just yesterday, September 5, 2007, from the mouth of America's 43rd president, George Walker Bush:

- *"We're kicking ass in Iraq!"* Comment to Australian Deputy P.M. Mark Vaile.

Kicking ass?

Never mind the fact that Bush's statement is patently untrue -- we are *not* "kicking ass" in Iraq. Just what we *are* currently doing in Iraq is anyone's guess. The very idea that the President of the United States -- an office once held by giants like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt -- comes off sounding like some pygmoid sh. .tkicker at the corner bar is deeply repugnant. It is totally offensive. It is completely inexcusable. It is also becoming *de rigeur*. I can well imagine Deputy P.M. Vaile thinking, "I thought I was chatting up the President of the United States; I must be bloody mistaken. Who in the hell is this bloke?"

Kicking ass?

Indeed, from "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" to "We're kicking ass in Iraq" in less than a seventy-five years is a madding example of devolution. It also puts an ugly, childlike sneer on the face of a great nation.

Kicking ass?

How in the world does one respond to Bush's boorishness? By merely saying, "Oy, there he goes again?" Perhaps with David's lament upon learning of the deaths of King Saul and son Jonathan: *Aych naflu giborim* -- "Oh, how the mighty have fallen!" But you know, as Annie just reminded me, "Its not Bush who was once mighty and is now fallen, its the office itself." Insightful woman, my wife . . .

Kicking Ass?

Through his words, actions, pose and demeanor, George W. Bush has become an embarrassment not only to the House of Washington and of Jefferson, of Lincoln and of Roosevelt, but to the very nation he supposedly leads and represents. How in the world a Connecticut-born, Phillips-Harvard-Yale educated Yankee Brahman could turn out to be a first cousin to Archie Bunker is beyond belief. But this is his pose; and this is the face of America the whole world now perceives.

Kicking ass?

There used to be a time when America exported as much idealism and hope as I-Pods and Hollywood hoopla. There was once a time when our leaders addressed the "higher angels" who hovered mere inches above the rooftops of America. We once elected presidents who made us proud to be beacons of light in an otherwise tenebrous world.

Kicking ass?

George W. Bush has become the "Typhoid Mary" of international relations. Need proof? Just ask any of the leaders of the original "coalition of the willing" partners what became of their political careers.

Ask Britain's Tony Blair.

Ask Italy's Silvio Berlusconi.

Ask Spain's Jose Maria Aznar.

Pretty soon you will be able to ask Australia's John Howard as well.

What these leaders all have in common is that they bought into George W. Bush's swaggering, mendacious vision, and as a result, have all been turned out of office. The people of Europe and South America, of Asia, Africa and the Pacific Rim may all drink at Starbucks, dine at MacDonald's wear Hollister tee-shirts, and watch interminable Columbo reruns; what they have not done is ally themselves with Bush's America. They cannot understand

how a nation that is wealthy beyond belief could be in so much debt; how a people who so cherishes freedom could blindly give up so many of those freedoms; of how our socio-political *zeitgeist* -- not to mention our intense interest -- could revolve around Brittany Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and Larry Craig. How, they wonder, could the United States of America ever elect a George W. Bush?

Kicking ass?

H.L. Mencken well understood a man like George W. Bush -- and the citizenry who would come to "elect" him not once, but twice. For back in the 1930s, Mencken -- who was witty, smart, clever as a whip but also an elitist snob and first-rate SOB -- wrote:

When a candidate for public office faces the voters he does not face men of sense; he faces a mob of men whose chief distinguishing mark is the fact that they are quite incapable of weighing ideas, or even of comprehending any save the most elemental -- men whose whole thinking is done in terms of emotion, and whose dominant emotion is dread of what they cannot understand. So confronted, the candidate must either bark with the pack or be lost... All the odds are on the man who is, intrinsically, the most devious and mediocre -- the man who can most adeptly disperse the notion that his mind is a virtual vacuum. The Presidency tends, year by year, to go to such men.

As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

I don't know about you, but I really do care about how America -- the nation and the people -- are *perceived* and *received* in the world outside our borders. I for one would rather have a president who represents the tradition of Jefferson and Roosevelt to that of Marlin Brando or John Wayne.

I just hope and pray that come November 2008, we, the American people will finally awaken from our lethargy and start "calcitrating some posterior."

That's the way a gentleman would say "kicking ass . . ."

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September 07, 2007 in [Reflection](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 13, 2007

"Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics"

No one knows of a certainty precisely who -- or whom -- should get the credit for that old chestnut, "There are three types of lies -- lies, damn lies, and statistics." Although my money has always been on Mark Twain, both Benjamin Disraeli -- back in the days when he was a great third-rate novelist -- and Oxford economics professor Alfred Marshall -- John Maynard Keynes' mentor -- have their devotees. In any event, and regardless of who the original author actually was, there is no getting around the fact that though cynically irreverent, it is nonetheless completely true. There *are* three types of lies, and of these, statistics are likely the most perverse.

Need solid proof?

Take this weeks' long-awaited Congressional testimony by General David Petraeus. For in his appearance before committees of both the House and Senate, the general not only misled [a diplomatic way of saying "he lied"] the American people, he cherry-picked intelligence [a "damn lie"] and used

faulty statistics in order to drive home three interconnected -- though predictable -- points:

- That we are making "major progress" in Iraq and that therefore,
- Must "stay the course," thus necessitating
- American troops remaining there for the "foreseeable future."

In other words, the general's testimony was the perfect trifecta: lies, damn lies, and statistics.

It really boggles the mind how General Petraeus -- a good man, an intelligent man -- could have presented his testimony with a straight face or without benefit of an airsick bag. For consider the Orwellian nature of the current "reality:"

- **Sectarian deaths are decreasing:** [[Note](#): According to the Pentagon's current "funny math," deaths by car bombs no longer count in the statistical assessment of civilian or military deaths.]
- **The number of assassinations are down:** [[Note](#): According to the 'new math,' assassinations only "count" if the victim was shot in the back of the head, not the front.]
- **The Iraqis believe the surge is working:** [[Note](#): According to a massive ABC/BBC poll, *every single Iraqi polled in Baghdad said that the surge had made security worse.*]

- The general's report was made independently of -- and without benefit of -- the White House. [Note: *The Washington Post* reported last Sunday that Petraeus or his staff "joined daily conference calls with the White House," and former Republican National Committee Chair Ed Gillespie to "map out ways of selling the surge." Further, the *Post* reported that Gillespie's political unit was "hard-wired" to Petraeus' military unit.]

To hear the General tell it, you'd think we were on the right track in Iraq. However, once you get past the lies, damn lies and statistics, several bald facts remain:

- That this has been the bloodiest month for U.S. troops since the war began -- despite the selfless, heroics acts of our military men and women.
- That the Iraqi "government" has barely met even 3 of the 18 benchmarks they agreed to over a year ago. In baseball terms, that's a .166 batting average -- enough to get a player sent back to the minors forever.
- That when asked by the venerable Virginia Senator John Warner if all our efforts in Iraq have made America a whit safer, a whit less vulnerable to terrorist attack, the General admitted that he "really did not know the answer." Can you imagine General Eisenhower, on the eve of the Normandy invasion, stating that he "really did not know the answer" if

the invasion would bring an end to the war in Europe? I rather doubt it.

Of course, beneath all the lies, damn lies, and statistics, there is one obvious truth: that the Bushies intend to hand this war and its eventual aftermath over to the next occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. In essence, they will continue to play a dastardly game of liar's poker right up till the moment that Hillary Clinton -- or Barack Obama, John Edwards, Bill Richardson, Chris Dodd, Joe Biden, or ? -- becomes Commander-in-Chief.

One would think that after General Patraeus' -- and Ambassador Crocker's -- dithering performance, that there would be a cacophonous hue-and-cry emanating from Capitol Hill. But no: for the most part, voices are muted; the president will likely continue to get his way.

The question is simply "why?" Are our elected officials suffering from a collective pre-senile dementia? Are they so afraid of being tarred with the brush of "disloyalty," of being labeled "cut-and-run," "left-wing peaceniks," or "a pack of pro-terrorist wimps," that they cannot find the backbone to do what is so obviously necessary? Why in the world were the House and Senate given back to the Democrats if not to put an end to America's biggest, most appalling foreign policy fiasco? When 51 Democrats cannot find the 9 Republican votes it takes to end

debate, or the additional 15 Republicans it requires to override a presidential veto, it is a sure sign of political cowardice and sterility. Especially when the president whose vetoes they cannot override "enjoys" the lowest public approval rating in the history of political polling.

I hate to say it, but the Democrats ought to hang their heads in shame. What we get from the Bush Administration is nothing more, nothing less, than what we've come to expect: endless war that is a boon to the few and a nightmare for the many; callous disregard for the truth; dead certainty that no matter where they stand, it is the epicenter of what is right and proper.

What we are getting from the Democrats, however, is equally maddening: virtually nothing that resembles political will or skill. It is high time for the Democrats of Capitol Hill to draw a stark line in the sand, define who they are with regards to the travesty that is Iraq, and do something about it.

Now.

Otherwise, when the history of this sorry era is one day written, I fear that next to the quote, "There are three types of lies . . ." one will find, in addition to the names "Twain," "Disraeli" and "Marshall," a roster of names that includes the vast majority of politicians in Washington D.C.

[Having listened to the President address the nation just moments ago, there is nothing new to add. The man, like his war, is a disaster. And can someone tell me which 36 nations are fighting with us in Iraq . . .?]

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All the Time

September 19, 2007

Is God a Democrat or a Republican?

Everyone has their favorite definition of the Yiddish word *chutzpah*. Literally, of course, "chutzpah," derived from a Hebrew word that is pronounced in nearly the same way [*chutz-PAH*] -- means "unbelievable gall," "audacity," or "insolence."

The late Jewish writer and humorist Leo Rosten provides what many consider *the* classic definition or example of *chutzpah*: "The kid who kills his parents then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan!" One of my favorites has *chutzpah* being the act of stealing your neighbor's goods, selling them at a three-day yard sale, and providing receipts.

This past week, a group of hardcore Christian activists in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, gave new meaning to the term. They decided that God Co-self ["Co" is a gender-inclusive pronoun I invented years back] is a conservative Republican! Their gathering, the so-called "Values Voter Presidential Debate," was attended by second-tier Republican presidential hopefuls former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Senator Sam Brownback [KS], Representatives Ron Paul [TX], Tom Tancredo [CO], Duncan

Hunter [CA] and perennial wannabe Alan Keyes. [No-shows included the "big-four" -- Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson, Mitt Romney and John McCain.] The "mini-six" -- who combined are less than a tiny asterisk in public opinion polls -- outdid themselves by identifying the Almighty as a member of the GOP's most conservative wing and proclaiming that Democrats are the Devil's own delight.

Talk about *chutzpah*. Since when did God become a card-carrying Republican?

The mini-six hit major hot-button issues like abortion and gay marriage, and decried the moral abyss into which the country has been slowly sinking since God knows when. To hear them, one would imagine that the United States is about to be taken over by a phalanx of anti-God, pro-life, ultra-leftist homosexuals who adore Osama bin Laden. They also showed unveiled contempt for Democrats, whom they seem to believe are all named Bill Clinton. According to Representative Tancredo, "There is a degradation of our society, especially the morals of our society. Bill Clinton redefined morality to the level of an alley cat." My goodness, Congressman, if President Clinton was responsible for lowering moral standards to those of a homeless urban feline, what does that say about Senators Larry Craig and David Vitter, Representatives Randy "Duke" Cunningham and Bob Ney, and disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff?

Governor Huckabee, a Baptist preacher who normally carries a ready smile and a pretty good sense of humor declared that the threat from Islamic militants is "A theological war . . . We're fighting a people who will not be satisfied until every last one of us is dead." Tancredo referred to the war with "Islamofascism" as "a clash between cultures." Maybe it is, but so too the clash between those imbued with absolute moral certainty and those who are merely seeking to make sense of the world at large.

Without question, Tancredo received first prize in the "Cretan of the Conference" competition for saying that the country is "just one kooky judge away from having homosexual marriage forced on the rest of us." Second prize went to Janet Folger, president of Faith2Action, for her smug self-righteousness in addressing those who "had something more important to do than talk to those of us who represent God's principles. To Giuliani, Thompson, Romney and McCain ["those who snubbed us"] she warned, "[you] will not win."

The fact of the matter is that in the past several years, the religious right has lost a great deal of traction within Republican circles. A small but growing number of religious conservatives are beginning to open their eyes to some very uncomfortable realities:

- That global warming, far from being a fraud perpetrated by liberal secular humanists and atheists is, in fact, a grave threat to all that God created.
- That while Republican candidates talk the talk about 'faith, family and good old fashioned values,' once elected they rarely walk the walk.
- That for far too long, they -- and their votes -- have been taken for granted.

In short, even born-again Christians are beginning to understand the meaning of the term *chutzpah*.

An ongoing debate has been waged in America for more than 200 years: what is the proper relationship -- if any -- between religion on the one hand, and polity on the other. Oh yes, the Constitution does specifically state in Article VI, "No religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification for any Office or public Trust under the United States." However, this has never stopped one political faction or the other from proclaiming itself to be the Party of God. And it has never stopped any individual from proclaiming that they know the will of God.

To be perfectly honest, religion *has* played a pivotal role in many of this nation's most laudable achievements: the abolition of slavery, Social Security, Medicare and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Conversely, it was also religion that fueled some of this nation's biggest missteps: Prohibition, denying women and African Americans the right to vote, and segregation.

What we have witnessed over the past generation however, breaks the historic mold. For in recent years, we have witnessed the "hijacking of God," whereby one party -- the Republicans -- has so much as proclaimed that their platform, their programs are the very will of the Almighty. What this makes the other party -- the Democrats -- of course, is the antithesis of all that God wishes and commands.

And that, when all is said and done, is an even more glaring example of *chutzpah*.

From all that I have read, studied and contemplated during nearly three decades as a rabbi, I can only conclude how little I really know or understand about God. For me to say that God is a Democrat or a Republican is, of course, preposterous. To be one and not the other would be a delimitation -- something which is totally illogical if God is indeed limitless.

For all those who, like the mini-six purport to know God's political choices, I offer up the words of the prophet Micah [6:8]:

It has been told to you, O man, what is good and what ha-Shem [God] requires of you; only to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

It seems to me that if anything, God is likely a member of the Green Party.

How's *that* for *chutzpah*?

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September 19, 2007 in [Politics and Religion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 26, 2007

Speaking Freely

Since its creation in June 1945, the United Nations has played host to a virtual rogue's gallery of modern history's most controversial leaders. It has provided a forum for such "notables" as:

- **Nikita Khrushchev**, who, while definitely banging his shoe, did not make his infamous "We will bury you!" statement from its rostrum.
- **Fidel Castro**, who delivered tortuously long rants against the U.S.A.
- **Yasser Arafat**, who came wearing a holster.
- **Idi Amin Dada** who, with all the sangfroid one might expect from a fifth-grade dropout equated Zionism with racism. [He got a standing ovation].
- **Hugo Chavez**, who called President Bush the "devil," "an alcoholic," and "a sick man." And just this week,
- **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, the sixth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Prior to addressing the U.N. General Assembly, Ahmadinejad -- he of the nearly unpronounceable five-syllable last name -- was given a forum at Columbia University. The speech and ensuing Q&A session were broadcast live on most television outlets here in the states. What viewers saw was Columbia President Lee



Bollinger's "take-no-prisoners" introduction which scored the Irani president for his country's persecution of women, students, homosexuals, members of the Baha'i faith, and journalists, and lambasted him for his Holocaust denial and threat to exterminate Israel. Near the middle of his 2,176-word introduction, Bollinger said, "Let's be clear at the beginning, Mr. President . . . you exhibit all the signs of a petty and cruel dictator."

One can easily agree or disagree with the propriety and mannerliness of Bollinger's introduction. It is my feeling that having gone so far out on a limb by inviting Ahmadinejad in the first place, Bollinger was attempting to save face with University trustees who thought him out of his mind. One of Bollinger's most important comments went largely unreported in the press: *"This event has nothing whatsoever to do with any 'rights' of the speaker, but only with our rights to listen and speak. We do it for ourselves."* In other words, The First Amendment is alive and well in the United States of America.

The precise nature and tone of President Ahmadinejad's remarks, answers and evasions are irrelevant to this piece; they have been exhaustively parsed, dissected, reamed-steamed-and-dry-cleaned by everyone from Bill O'Reilly to Ariana Huffington. Most everyone in public life has weighed in on whether or not he should have been given the Columbia forum in the first place. True to form, most conservative stalwarts found his mere presence at Columbia an affront to every soldier from George Washington to David Petraeus. "Damn free speech!" they roared, "This man is the devil incarnate! He has no right to an audience! Arrest him!"

Just as predictably, President Bush weighed in with a rambling comment full of sound and fury, signifying God knows what: *"He's the head of a state sponsor of terror, and yet an institution in our country gives him the chance to express his point of view, which certainly speaks to the freedoms of the country. I'm not sure I'd offer the same invitation, but nonetheless it speaks volumes about the greatness, really, of America. We're confident enough to let a person express his views."* Asked to be more precise, about how he felt, he responded, "I guess its OK by me."

Interestingly, a national CNN poll taken the day before Ahmadinejad's appearance at Columbia found that 72% of those questioned -- **72%**! -- were in favor of his being permitted to speak. This would *seem* to say a great deal about how much the

American public respects, supports and reveres our First Amendment freedoms.

At virtually the same time that Ahmadinejad was "wowing" his Columbia audience with moronic comments -- "Iran has no homosexuals," "The Holocaust did happen but we have to do a lot more research" -- the United States Senate was putting its Mark of Cain on the very First Amendment rights being enjoyed by the Iranian leader over at Morningside Heights.

The issue at hand, of course, was the Senate's condemnation of Moveon.org's "infamous" full-page *New York Times* ad headlined "GENERAL PETRAEUS OR GENERAL BETRAY US?" In this ad, which is as fully covered by the First Amendment as are the words of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the 2-million plus strong group



characterized General Petraeus as " . . . a military man constantly at odds with the facts." The ad, which was a preemptive strike across the bow of Patraeus' then-forthcoming Congressional testimony, noted that "In 2004, he said there was 'tangible progress' in Iraq and that 'Iraqi leaders are stepping forward.'" The ad went on to note that "Every independent report on the ground situation in Iraq shows that the surge has failed.

Yet the general claims a reduction in violence." It concludes by saying, *"General Petraeus will not admit what everyone knows: Iraq is mired in an unwinnable religious civil war. We may hear of a plan to withdraw a few thousand American troops. But we won't hear what Americans are desperate to hear: a timetable for withdrawing all our troops Today, before Congress and before the American people, General Petraeus is likely to become General Betray Us."*

Whether or not one agrees with the ad's point of view is also irrelevant; it is protected by the First Amendment. So what did the Senate do even as Ahmadinejad was "frigastulating" over at Columbia? They voted 72-25 [with three not voting] to pass "Senate Amendment 2934 to Senate Amendment 2011 to House Resolution 1585, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2008." 22 Senate Democrats joined with virtually every Senate Republican to pass a resolution essentially damning Moveon.Org's right to free speech!

The resolution they so overwhelmingly passed expressed *"The sense of the Senate that General David H. Petraeus, Commanding General, Multi-National Force-Iraq, deserves the full support of the Senate and strongly condemn[s] personal attacks on the honor and integrity of General Petraeus and all members of the United States Armed Forces."* While I may not be the shiniest apple in the barrel, I cannot for the life of me understand how

the Moveon ad could be construed as a "personal attack" upon either General Petraeus or members of our Armed Forces.

By the way, if its the play-on-words "General Betray Us" that has them so terribly shook up, they may be interested to know that the term actually originated with none other than Rush Limbaugh!

In any event, what the Senate so forthrightly condemned was something called FREE SPEECH. In going over the vote tally, I was both saddened and amazed to see that this noxious "Sense of the Senate" resolution was supported by such liberal stalwarts as Maryland's Ben Cardin and Barbara Mikulski, Wisconsin's Herb Kohl, California's Dianne Feinstein, and Vermont's Patrick Leahy. *[Note to our Florida readers: Senator Bill Nelson voted in favor of the resolution.]*

Is it any wonder that Congress has a whopping 11% approval rating in the most recent poll?

For more than 200 years, Freedom of Speech has been an illustrious hallmark in American society. Yes, it does have a limit or two: back in 1919, the Supreme Court, in *Schenck v. U.S.*, created the "Clear and Present Danger" rule. Writing for the majority, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, "The question is whether the words used . . . are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent." The *Schenck* decision

is famous for the phrase "shouting 'fire' at a crowded theater." Eventually Holmes' "Clear and Present Danger" rule was weakened by a less restrictive "bad tendency" test [*Whitney v. Calif.* 1927] and further sapped by the "imminent lawless action" test [*Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 1969].

In any event, the Senate's action is frightening beyond compare. At a time when we are faced with warrantless wiretaps, forced rendition and the curtailment of *habeas corpus*, one wonders how many more freedoms we are going to lose. The Moveon.Org ad simply does not pass the "imminent lawless action" test.

I guess the best way to be assured of free speech in the future is to become an Iranian despot.

Just ask Mahmoud . . . he ought to know.

September 26, 2007 in [Political Opinion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 04, 2007

The Profit of War

Although I tend to prefer the 1926 silent version with Ronald Colman, Neil Hamilton and Ralph Forbes, William Wellman's 1939 epic "Beau Geste" is still one heck of a film. This version, starring Garry Cooper, Ray Milland and the 21-year old Robert Preston, has the three ingredients of all great action pictures: romance, intrigue and revenge. And, to top it off all are set against the backdrop of Foreign Legionnaires plotting mutiny in the midst of attacking Arabs. Cooper, Milland and Preston play -- respectively -- Beau, Michael and Digby Geste, three inseparable brothers who, fleeing from possible criminal charges in England, make their way to North Africa where they join the French Foreign Legion. There, the brothers face greater danger from Sgt. Markoff, their sadistic commander [played by that old reliable, Brian Donlevy] than from the rebellious Arabs.

Without question, foreign mercenaries have provided ample fodder for great, action-driven motion pictures ever since the days of D.W. Griffith and Wallace Reid. To the mind of most moviegoers, these mercenaries are the essence of romance, courage and adventure. They are also impossibly handsome, invariably witty, and oh so terribly dare-devilish.

But such is not the case in real life. In real life, mercenaries are far more often motivated by lucre than loyalty, their employers by profit than patriotism. But make no mistake about it, what we have operating over in Iraq and Afghanistan is the equivalent of a new "American Foreign Legion."

The current imbroglio over Blackwater USA, a self-described "private military company" is but one glaring example. In testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Blackwater chief Erik Prince [not to be confused with *Eric* Prince, a character in "The Little Mermaid"], a former Navy SEAL, parried charges that his "private security contractors" are "acting as cowboys in Iraq, shooting first and not even bothering to ask questions later." Besides underscoring the deep divide between how committee Democrats and Republicans view the war in general -- and the use of mercenaries in particular -- the hearings raised a host of as yet unanswered questions. Among them:

- How many of these so-called "private security contractors" are currently operating in Iraq and Afghanistan?

- As a strictly-for-profit operation, what constraints -- if any -- can the United States military exercise over them?
- What is the precise relationship between private security firms and the United States military?
- How do companies like Blackwater USA [or Halliburton, AEGIS Specialist Risk Management, ERINYS, DynCorp, Triple Canopy or any of the reportedly 120,000+ private firms operating in Iraq] get their "no-bid" contracts?

The case of Erik Prince's Blackwater USA is, to say the least, illustrative, if not downright frightening. Who is Eric Prince, and how did Blackwater become such a front-line player in Iraq? What are their ties to the Bush Administration? Wipe away the romance and adventure of "Beau Geste," and here's what you have:

Erik Prince, a former Navy Seal, who founded Blackwater USA a decade ago, is the child of great wealth. Originally from Holland, Michigan, the 38-year old Prince's family owned the auto-parts giant "Prince Corporation," which was sold to Johnson Controls, Inc., in the early 1990s for \$1.3 billion. Armed with immense wealth, Prince personally financed the formation of Blackwater in 1997.

Prince's late father, Edgar, was a founder -- along with Gary Bauer - of the Christian right "Family Research Council." His sister, Betty DeVos, a former Chair of the Michigan Republican Party, is the wife of Dick DeVos, the billionaire former owner of Amway, who ran an unsuccessful 2006 campaign for Michigan governor. Erik Prince is Vice President of the Edgar and Elsa Prince Foundation, which endows organizations associated with the Christian Right. Over a three year period, he donated more than \$670,000 to James Dobson's "Focus on Family," and is a board member of "Christian Freedom International," a non-profit group whose stated mission is helping "Christians who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ."

Most tellingly, Prince and Blackwater USA are as firmly tied into the Bush White House as Halliburton is to Vice President Dick Cheney. Since 1998, Prince has donated more than \$200,000 to Republican candidates including Bush and Tom DeLay. Turning a \$200,000 investment into a billion dollar no-bid contract is nice work if you can get it.

As the old late-night infomercial goes: "But wait, there is more."

Permit me to introduce you to a handful of Blackwater executives:

- Company president Gary Jackson: Jackson, 49, has made significant contributions to Republicans such as Tom DeLay, former House Armed Services Chair Duncan Hunter and former Appropriations Chair Jerry Lewis.
- Vice Chair Cofer Black: Black, 56, spent 3 decades with the CIA. He was the agency's Chief of Counterterrorism at the time of the 9/11 attack.
- CEO and General Counsel Joseph Schmitz: Schmitz, 49, was at one time the chief Pentagon official responsible for investigating waste, fraud and abuse. He is currently under congressional investigation. It should be noted that Schmitz's father, former California Representative John Schmitz, was one of the founders of the John Birch Society. His sister, Mary Kay Le Tourneau, made headlines a few years back when she was imprisoned for having an affair with one of her 13-year old students. [They eventually got married and now have at least two children.]

In testifying before Waxman's House Oversight Committee, Prince did a nifty two-step around most of the committee's most pressing questions:

- He balked at the committee's characterization of his employees as mercenaries, sternly informing them that they are "loyal Americans."
- When asked for financial information on Blackwater, he declined to provide it, flatly stating, "We're a private company, and there's the key word *private*."
- When asked why employees involved in fatal incidents had been "whisked out of the country," he blithely responded, "We can't flog [them], we can't incarcerate [them]."

Truth to tell, Blackwater USA has been involved in a score of questionable activities, leading to the deaths of scores of Iraqi civilians. These mercenaries -- along with those of so many other such companies -- play by a different set of rules. And despite whatever patriotic pronouncements the various company CEO's may make, they and their "independent contractors" -- MERCENARIES -- are engaged in the business of turning a profit.

The Bush Administration's "outsourcing" of virtually everything from security to soda looks and smells like an immense political payback. It is estimated that currently, there are more than 180,000 "private

contractors" [read: mercenaries] earning piles of money in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their numbers easily outstrip the total number of uniformed troops we have over there. As things currently stand, these "contractors" are immune to both the rules of engagement and any ensuing prosecution. And how much their services have inflated the very cost of our so-called "War on Terror" is anyone's guess.

When one strips away the romance and adventure of "Beau Geste," today's mercenaries -- and the companies that employ them -- make the sadistic Sgt. Markoff look like an Eagle Scout.

Should Senator Hillary Clinton become the Democratic Party's presidential nominee, be prepared to witness a revival of the old "Whitewater" scandal. How ironic that, should she wish, she will be able to respond with one word: "Blackwater."

It's all there, in "black and white. . . "

October 04, 2007 in [Blackwater](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) |

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 10, 2007

An Open Letter To The Democrats Of Capitol Hill

Dear Democrats of Capitol Hill:

Permit me to begin with a quote from -- gasp! -- Karl Marx: *"History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."* Having cited this aged nostrum from the hoary-headed Father of Communism, I hope you won't become fearful and feel the need to read what follows in the dead of night cowering behind locked doors. Please do not fall into the trap of fearing that the reading of a mere 9 words from Marx will cause the great unwashed public to accuse you of being fellow travelers.

It's just this sort of irrational cowering fear that I wish to address. Additionally, I believe we are all in dire need of taking a backward glance, lest Marx's bromide become true.

Precisely 11 months, you took back the House and Senate from George W. Bush's GOP. And although pundits and commentators have sited a host of reasons for this realignment, one issue was of primary importance: George Bush's so-called "war on terror." In giving you back the House and Senate we, the American voting public presumed ourselves to have sent a clear and unmistakable message. To wit, draw down the troops, end the war, and restore our civil liberties. If you will recall, the weeks between victory and the beginning of this 110th Congress were both heady and optimistic; at last, we thought, there was a good chance of veering off the potholed road of paranoia, and moving onto to the comfortably paved highway of promise. With the Democrats back controlling Congress we believed, finally, finally, there would be a good chance of deflecting -- if not stopping -- the Republican juggernaut. Instead of a Congress that was goose stepping us into oblivion, we now had a federal legislature that would restore honor, sanity and liberty.

I am sorry to say we were wrong.

- Instead of standing up to the president, you have caved and acquiesced.
- Instead of legislating an end to the war in Iraq, you have voted overwhelmingly in favor of continued fiscal support.
- Instead of halting -- or at least rolling back -- the most egregious assaults on our personal liberties, you have voted to extend and expand warrantless wiretaps.
- Instead of standing up and screaming "A war with Iran? What are you, insane?" you have voted overwhelmingly to declare the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a "terrorist organization," thus laying

the groundwork for what many see as an inevitable future invasion.

- Instead of standing tall with those who oppose this war, you have voted -- again overwhelmingly -- to denounce those who exercise free speech.

The question is, why? What motivates you? Precisely what is it that you fear the most?

More than one commentator has opined that you do not want to open yourselves up to the charge of being "weak on defense" or "allied with the forces of evil." Somewhere in the back of your collective mind, I am reasonably certain that you are still haunted by the "Swift-boating" of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry and the trashing of former Georgia Senator Max Cleland, both of whom were certified war heroes.

Let me tell you something, dear Democrats. As obnoxious, as brazen as the attacks on these two valorous gentleman may have been, there was something even worse: their lack of response. Instead of taking the offensive and hurling verbal grenades back at the Swift-boaters, Senator Kerry just stood there like a statue in the town square. And Cleland -- the triple amputee -- who saw his likeness portrayed next to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, was shocked into silence. Had either of these men fought their political battles with even half the courage they showed in Vietnam, they would have emerged victorious.

This is history, and it is repeating itself. Today it is tragedy; tomorrow it may well become farce.

Let me ask you, my Democratic friends: do you really believe that being called "weak on security" is going to swing an election in your district or state? What does voting to extend warrantless wiretaps, the continued blank-check funding of the war or the Kyl-Lieberman Amendment on the Iranian Republican Guard say about your collective political courage or conviction? How in the world can senators like Dianne Feinstein, Carl Levin, Chuck Schumer, Hillary Clinton, Harry Reid and Richard Durbin [the latter two being our senate leaders] vote in favor of something that has the chance of becoming this era's "Gulf of Tonkin" resolution?

I know that as members of the House and Senate, you read polling numbers with all the gusto and interest that "Joe and Jill Six-Pack" read the sports pages of their local newspapers. As such, you must certainly know that a clear majority of the American public is against this war, against warrantless wiretaps, against invading Iran, and increasingly skeptical of anything the current administration says.

Would someone please explain to me where's the danger in standing up and being counted? As dear old dad used to say, "Let 'em call you 'pisher.' That's not going to make you one." And you know something? Despite what the likes of Limbaugh, O'Reilly, Coulter, Beck and the gang may say, the

American public still has a great deal of respect for those who stand for something besides winning the next election. Need proof?

Take Wisconsin Senator Russell Feingold and Minnesota's late Senator Paul Wellstone. Both these men have known what it feels like to be the lone dissenter -- of being the guy who is the "1" in a 99-1 vote. And yet, even though their constituents may not have agreed with them much of the time, they gladly voted for their reelection. Why? Because they knew that their senator wasn't motivated by the politics of fear; by the politics of winning at all costs.

Dear Democrats: instead of trying to come off as "Republican lite" or "more-bloodthirsty-than-thou," why not try acting and voting like the true party of the people? It seems to me that the Republicans have given you a real chance to become the majority party for the next generation. You can see it in public opinion polls. You can see it in all those Republicans who have either announced their retirement or are facing serious, well-heeled challengers for the first time in years. You can even see it in the lackluster Presidential wannabes who are all running as far away from the White House as is humanly possible.

Yes, the signs and portents are all there. However -- and this is crucial -- if you can't [or won't] draw a line in the political sand and refuse to capitulate to the inevitable, ridiculous charges that come your way, then the gift you're being handed will just as inevitably turn to dust.

If history must repeat itself, let it be the election of 1932. That won't be a farce; it will be a triumph.

Yours for tomorrow,
A devoted Democrat.

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October 10, 2007 in [Political Opinion](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 18, 2007

Much Ado About Nothing

Shakespeare hit the nail on the head when he had Hamlet's mutter "What a piece of work is man!" Showing classic signs of what we now call "bipolarity," or "manic depression" ["I have lost all my mirth . . . the earth . . . seems . . . sterile"] the prince concludes by calling man "this quintessence of dust."

Yes indeed, man *is* a piece of work. Admittedly, when spoken by the prince of Denmark, it carries a different meaning than in modern parlance. For today, when one calls another a "piece of work," what is being expressed is not awe, but rather contempt, derision or utter disbelief.

Among those most deserving of first prize in the "What a piece of work is man" category, are the hacks at Fox News Network. For on October 4, 2007, they breathlessly reported that Senator Barack Obama, that "scourge of all who love the red white and blue," no longer wears an American flag pin on his lapel. To the woolly-headed Mastodons of Fox and their blinkered minions, this can mean but one thing: that Senator Obama is an obvious traitor who cares not a fig about the United States of America.

Oh really?

Even the most partisan of Democrats can come up with reasons for supporting someone other than Illinois' junior senator. One could say that he lacks solid international experience [as did both FDR and JFK]. One might opine that United States senators rarely win presidential elections [the last one to go directly from upper chamber to White House was JFK, and before that Warren G. Harding]. One might even argue that Obama has not shown himself to be all that different on matters of policy from the other front-runners.

Then too, one could argue against all these by simply pointing out that "he's is a breath of fresh air."

But no partisan Democrat -- or thoughtful independent for that matter -- is going to shy away from Obama simply because he does not wear an American flag lapel pin. To take this position -- as many of those who would never vote for a Democrat in the first place undoubtedly do -- is to grant supremacy to symbolism, to make a simple pin, the hallmark of sincere patriotism.

Stuff and nonsense!

When questioned about why he no longer wears said pin, Obama explained:

"The truth is that right after 9/11 I had a pin. Shortly after 9/11, particularly because we're talking about the Iraq war, that became a

substitute for, I think, true patriotism, which is speaking out on issues that are of importance to our national security I decided that I'm not going to wear that pin on my chest. Instead, I'm gonna' try to tell the American people what I believe, what will make this country great and hopefully that will be a testimony to my patriotism."

I don't know about you, but this seems both sincere and reasonable to me.

The entire subject of symbol-versus-commitment in modern American society is one that deserves a full hearing. Far too often, we use pins, bracelets, bumper stickers and even tattoos as replacements for purposive action.

- How easy it is for a politician to stage a photo-op surrounded by darling little children and then vote against S-CHIP. The photo is a symbol is "co's" great concern for the kids of this nation; "co's" vote proves otherwise. [NOTE: For those reading this column for the first time "co" is my gender-inclusive pronoun for "he/she;" likewise, "co's" means "his/her."] Even as this is being written, it has just come across the wire that the House failed by 16 votes to override President Bush's veto on S-CHIP.
- How maddening to be driving behind an enormous gas-guzzling hummer adorned with a bumper sticker proclaiming "I support the troops" or "Remember 9/11." To my way of thinking if the Hummer driver truly supported the troops or was affected by the tragedy of 9/11, "co" would have jettisoned "co's" automotive behemoth in favor of something that did not put quite so much cash in the pockets of our enemies.
- How utterly hypocritical to use symbolic buzz-terms like "compassion," "freedom" or "Democracy" and then act or vote in a manner that clearly highlights the opposite.
- How patently Un-American to tar those who disagree with the brush of "treachery," "deceit," or that most current of pejoratives, "liberal." To do so is not only Un-American; it strips words of their true meanings and makes them into hateful symbols.

Seen in this light, is it any wonder that Senator Obama has been pilloried for not wearing his American flag pin?

I for one applaud him for standing up and proclaiming that, as the old saw goes, "actions speak louder than words." Or in this case, symbols.

But let us return to Shakespeare.

One of the Bard's best comedies carries a title that really sums up the entire Obama-flag lapel imbroglio: *Much Ado About Nothing*. One will recall that this five-act play, which takes place in the idyllic Italian town of Messina centers on the witty shenanigans of two star-struck lovers: Claudio and Hero, Benedick and Beatrice. Shortly after meeting, young Claudio and Hero

decide to marry. To pass the time in the week before their wedding, the two lovers and their friends decide to play a game. They want Benedick and Beatrice, an older couple who are clearly meant for one another, to stop their arguing and fall in love. The group's tricks succeed, and the older pair do eventually fall in love.

At the play's outset, the caustic Beatrice, speaking of Benedick, utters a phrase that easily sums up all those who use symbols as replacements for action:

"He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat; it ever changes with the next block."

Thank you William Shakespeare; once again, you said a mouthful.

What a piece of work is man!

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 25, 2007

Whose Values?

Quick now, by a show of hands, who among us does not possess a set of values?

We're waiting . . .

OK, time's up. Let's tabulate the vote.

Amazing, we don't see a single hand raised.

Could this mean that we all have values?

Seems pretty self-evident, doesn't it?

Well guess again. It would seem that, according to many out there in the American heartland, there are *values* and then there are **VALUES**. At least that's what it seems like the folks attending the recent Family Research Council-sponsored "Values Voters Summit" would have us believe. The "summit," which was attended by several thousand card-carrying "true believers," watched and listened as Republican presidential hopefuls Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, Ron Paul, Fred Thompson, Rudolph Giuliani and John McCain labored to explain why they -- and they alone -- must be considered the true vassal of values.

Most regrettably -- and somewhat predictably -- not a single Democratic aspirant was invited to attend the values confab. Guess this means that when it comes to Democrats and Republicans, there are those who believe, as we noted above, that there are *values* and then there are **VALUES**.

Each of the Republican candidates addressed the conference, taking great pains to lay out their "values" credentials. And what were those values?

With the exception of former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, most of the GOP hopefuls made it abundantly clear that under their administration:

- Abortion will be outlawed,

- The Constitution will be amended to declare that marriage is only between a man and a woman,
- That Muslims are infidels and that
- Illegal immigrants will be given no quarter.
- Stem cell research is an affront to Divinity.

To be sure, not all the candidates came to the summit carrying the same baggage. Governor Romney came carrying both the baggage of his Mormon faith -- which unbelievably, is still a point of contention among many Christians -- and the mere fact that he had served the most liberal state in the Union. For many, the aroma of the Latter Day Saint's polygamous past is still a stench in their nostrils. To his credit, Governor Romney, who has been married to the same woman for 38 years and has five sons and ten grandchildren, displayed uncommon courage in merely showing up.

Giuliani was of course saddled with his personal history: three marriages, two alienated children and the taint of political moderation on such issues as abortion and gay marriage. Standing tall, the former New York Mayor proclaimed, "My belief in God and my reliance on his guidance is at the core of who I am." He further explained to the flock that, "My eighty percent friend is not my twenty percent enemy." Then, taking a swipe at Romney, he noted, "Isn't it better for me to tell you what I believe, rather than change my positions to fit the prevailing winds?" For this he received polite applause.

Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee -- the "other" governor from Hope -- had values voters cheering when he declared, "We do not have the right to move the standards of God to meet cultural norms. We need to move the cultural norms to meet God's standards."

Senator John McCain, came to the conference with the heaviest baggage of all. He continues to be suspect because of a reputation as a political "maverick" and the remembrance of his once having labeled the Reverends Falwell and Robertson "agents of intolerance."

The values crowd rewarded Romney with a first-place finish in their straw poll: 27.6% of the vote.

Former Governor Huckabee came in a razor-thin second with 27.1% of the vote. What amazes is that Huckabee, a fire-and-brimstone Southern Baptist preacher, only came in second. This would appear to point to a measure of political pragmatism on the part of the values crowd; they know that Huckabee hasn't a snowball's chance in Hades, and would rather give an edge -- no matter how slight -- to a candidate who *may* have a chance of winning.

The rest of the tabulation saw Texas Representative Ron Paul -- an orthodox Libertarian -- coming in third with 15%, followed by former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson [9.8%], and Mayor Giuliani [1.8%].

Rounding out the field, Senator McCain came in dead last with less than 1% of the vote.

Up till about a generation ago, those currently identifying themselves as "values voters" tended to stay the hell away from politics. For the most part, they saw their most basic more moral concerns were better addressed and better served by preachers, not politicians. Then came the Supreme Court's *Roe v Wade* decision, which legalized abortion and freed the voter-rich genie from the bottle of Christian parochialism. Prodded and organized by such champions as Paul Weyrich, Phyllis Schlafly, the Rev. Donald Wilmon and Brent Bozell, the Christian Right -- as it was originally called -- started to become a homogeneous political powerhouse within the Republican Party.

Presidents Reagan, Bush '41 and Bush '43 -- indeed most Republicans -- ran up an increasingly large debt with those who now call themselves "values voters." The debt these voters accrued through their almost universal support, has been throwing off enormous dividends for more than a quarter of a century. From political appointments to their overwhelming support for core "values issues," Republicans have bent over backwards to keep the flock within their fold. The "values" of these "values voters" have become the "values" of the GOP.

Implied in all this, of course, is the frightening thought that those whose **values** may differ have, in essence, no **values** at all.

Again, by a show of hands, who amongst us does not have a set of values? Still no hands? What do you think about that?

It is indeed difficult to over stress just how dangerous -- how patently malignant -- it is for one segment of society to believe that *their* standards, *their* values, are so firmly etched in stone as to be unquestionably, inerrantly, universal. America was founded and built upon a pedestal that proclaims *E Pluribus Unum* -- "Out of many comes one." It does *not* proclaim "One set of values for the many."

We do find fault with all those Republican hopefuls who see the need to trot out their religious or values *bona fides*; this is, after all, an election year, and all's fair in love, war, and elections. What we *do* find extraordinary fault with are all those who would inspect, reject and objectify anyone whose **values** may differ.

We are not all Christians.

We are not all Jews.

We are not all Muslims.

We are not all theists.

What we are, are Americans, people who do have **VALUES**.

All those who agree, please raise your hand . . .

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 01, 2007

Climbing the Alps Together

Like many who spend an immense amount of time immersed in books, I am an inveterate collector and cataloger of pithy quotes and maxims. Currently, I am using two of my favorites as alternating Screen Savers:

- *"Learn as if you're going to live forever; live as if you're going to die tomorrow,"* and
- *"Growing old is mandatory; growing up is purely optional."*

Truth to tell, I don't have the slightest idea who first penned these gems. What I do know is that they are both demonstrably true. As Adjunct Professor in three different university "Lifelong Learning" departments, I am in almost daily contact with a marvelously unique subculture: perpetually young senior citizens. The courses I teach -- everything from Current Events and "Great Decisions" to Biography and Foreign Cinema -- are attended by hundreds of men and women in their 60's, 70's, 80's and even 90's. That they continue to attend university classes even in their advanced years is testament to their vitality; that they have such intriguing insights and ask such searching questions is testament to their eternal youthfulness. In my experience, they are as bright, questing and fully engaged -- perhaps even more so -- as any undergraduates I have ever known or taught.

These "Lifelong Learners" bring with them thirsting minds, vast experience and indomitable spirits. Indeed, it is often impossible to figure out who is learning the most -- the students or their professor. In matter of fact, the seeds for many of my Blog articles have been planted by my students through class discussions.

I also come from a family which, fortuitously, "suffers" from" what I like to call "terminal longevity." My father Henry enjoyed life until his latter 80s. My mother Alice, now proudly in her eighties, is just about the youngest most engaged, political savvy person I know. She is still the embodiment of Dylan Thomas' elder who "rage[s] against the dying of the light." Our cousin Mitzi, a year older than Mom, is another family member who won't sit back and watch others idly bleed.

In reality, these are the fortunate minority; folks who have the physical, financial and psychic freedom that enables them to continue living independent lives. For far too many however, the so-called "golden years" are tarnished with poverty, loneliness, abuse and victimization.

According to the most recent figures, nearly 5 million senior citizens are abused in this country every single year. Reported abuses range from assault, battery and fraud, to identity theft and even rape. Many of these

abuses occur in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and hospitals. Even more shockingly, many of these abuses occur at home.

Frequently the most dangerous and demeaning abuses are perpetrated by nursing home workers who were never properly screened before being hired. Amazingly, few states have laws on the books that mandate background checks on those who care for the elderly. Then too, there are no federal laws that make the abuse of elderly Americans a crime. We have laws that make animal abuse a crime; why not the abuse of our revered seniors?

Why indeed!

Crimes against the elderly are epidemic in America. Not only are our senior citizens being robbed, raped and ripped off; they are being ignored, humiliated and debased. And where most people find both compassion and revulsion when our dogs, cats or horses are abused, few find the strength to do anything about crimes against the elderly.

Its about time for a change.

For the past five years, there have been two bills wafting through the halls of Congress that would make abuse of the elderly a Federal crime with severe federal penalties. The Senate version is S. 1070; in the House, it is H.R. 1783. Sponsored by Senators Orrin Hatch [R-UT], Blanche Lincoln [D-AK], Herb Kohl [D-WI] and Gordon Smith [R-OR], and Representatives, Rahm Emanuel [D-IL] and Peter King [R-NY], the **Elder Justice Act** would:

- *Amend the Social Security Act to enhance the social security of the Nation by ensuring adequate public-private infrastructure and to resolve to prevent, detect, treat, intervene in, and prosecute elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. . ."*

Specifically, the Elder Justice Act would:

- Create an Office of Elder Justice within the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services,
- Secure funding for adult protective services at the federal level,
- Create an "Elder Justice Coordinating Council" to assure cooperation of efforts at all levels, and
- To fund and assist such entities at the state and local levels.

Most importantly perhaps, the Elder Justice Act would increase the capacity of prosecutors throughout the country to bring elder abuse charges.

Not surprisingly, both bills have the overwhelming bi-partisan support of both houses of Congress. Not surprisingly, there are no known opponents of

this legislation. Shockingly however, neither bill has yet to make it out of committee and come to the floor for debate, much less passage.

The question is "why?"

Interestingly, the answer is not what one might expect.

It is not that "the enactment of this legislation will cost too much." In fact, the Elder Justice Act calls for the allocation of a mere \$650 million a year for the seven years of the bill. Currently, the federal government funds child abuse programs to the tune of \$7 billion a year.

It is not because nursing home and assisted living facility owners are balking at the added cost of screening all prospective employees. An amendment by Senator Kohl provides that criminal background checks may be included in a facility's federal reimbursement. Another proposal -- by Delaware Senator Joseph Biden -- would create a background check center for volunteers with a "dedicated stream of funding."

It is not even the fact that more conservative legislators are grouching about adding "another level of needless bureaucracy."

So what is the problem? Who is to blame?

The simple answer is "we are all to blame." Specifically, members of Congress can be blamed for spending too much time in front of cameras and microphones holding forth on such "hot" topics as as Terri Schiavo, Media Matters for America, Rush Limbaugh and Senator Hillary Clinton.

Then too, Congress is to blame because it does not understand that those who prey on the elderly are also terrorists.

We, the citizens are to blame for not lobbying or exerting sufficient pressure on our elected representatives. Seniors represent one of the most powerful voting blocs in this country. The most recent statistics show that approximately 65% of all people over the age of 60 voted in the last presidential election. Compared to an overall national average of not more than 50%, and you have one powerful faction.

One of the great lessons many of us learned back in the sixties was about the power and efficacy of community involvement. Many of the most epochal events of the past 40 years came about through the concerted efforts of we the people: think the end of the Vietnam War, the eighteen-year old vote, and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. In each case --and dozens of others -- change occurred because enough citizens saw that they had both a vested interest and power.

Might I suggest that if each of us would make the adoption of the Elder Justice Act a cause for ourselves, our organizations and our communities, we could see it enacted? Every senator and representative has an elder constituency. Every senator and representative is painfully aware of how many votes they cast. No senator or representative is so tone-deaf as to ignore the voice of the public.

For anyone interested in joining this crusade, might I suggest that a good starting point would be the "Elder Justice Coalition" website. You can log on at www.elderjusticecoalition.com. It is the single-best source for information and tips on how we can help to insure passage of this vital legislation.

130 years ago, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow noted in a letter to a friend that *"To be seventy is like climbing the Alps. You reach a snow-crowned summit, and see behind you the deep valley stretching miles and miles away, and before you other summits higher and whiter, which you may have the strength to climb, or may not. Then you sit down and meditate and wonder which it will be."*

I may not be seventy, but I too have "meditated" and wondered, "which it will be." And I have concluded that passage of the Elder Justice Act is essential.

Now.

Let's climb the Alps together. . .

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 09, 2007

God, Guns, Gays . . . AND Giuliani?

This week, the Reverend Pat Robertson announced his endorsement of former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani for president. In speaking to the press, Robertson termed Giuliani "More than acceptable to people of faith."

Let's see if we've got this straight:

- The Reverend Robertson once proclaimed that the 9/11 attacks were God's judgment against America for its permissive attitude towards homosexuality and abortion.
- *Mayor Giuliani is Pro-Choice, supports Gay Rights, and has made a few appearances in drag.*
- The Reverend Robertson once sued Mayor Giuliani over New York's recognition of same-sex domestic partnerships.
- The Reverend Robertson has made a career out of bemoaning the decline of the nuclear family, the rise of divorce and the alarming growth of hedonism in American society. During his 1986 presidential bid, he was quoted as saying, "Our motion pictures, our television, our radio, our youth concerts . . . seem to have a single message: God is out, casual sex, infidelity, and easy divorce [are in]."
- *Mayor Giuliani has been married thrice, divorced twice [he announced the second one at a press conference], and has cut off all contact with his children.*
- The Reverend Robertson has long assailed the lack of ethics and integrity among American politicians.
- *Mayor Giuliani's former Police Commissioner [and business associate] Bernard Kerik, has just been indicted on a host of federal charges including mail and wire fraud, tax fraud, making false statements on a bank application, making false statements for a U.S. government position and "theft of honest services."*
- The Reverend Robertson has long railed against the alarming rise in drug use. During his ill-fated run for the presidency some years back, he said, "Illegal drugs are being sold to fourth grade children. Half of our schoolchildren have tried marijuana. We are under assault by a tidal wave of drugs."

- *Mayor Giuliani's South Carolina campaign chair, Thomas Ravenel, is currently under federal indictment for the purchase -- and possible distribution of -- cocaine. If found guilty, Mr. Ravenel faces up to twenty years in prison.*

Got all that?

So precisely what is it that Pat Robertson sees in Rudy Giuliani? That he is not Mitt Romney, who, by the way, tried like the dickens to get Robertson's imprimatur? That Mayor Giuliani is not Senator John McCain, who once referred to Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell as "agents of intolerance?" That he is not former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, who probably hasn't a snowball's chance in Hades of capturing the nomination?

The answer likely resides not so much in the realm of the spirit as in the hurly-burly of politics. Reverend Robertson no doubt believes that Mayor Giuliani represents the Republican's single best chance for defeating Senator Hillary Clinton. In an oblique sense, Robertson's endorsement of Giuliani is also a backhanded endorsement of the senator. If this comes across as a tortured piece of logic, so be it. It is however, no more logically skewed than someone backing a candidate who endorses the very evils -- i.e. abortion rights and gay rights -- he claims were the cause of the worst domestic horror in American history. Ah me, bedfellows make strange politicians.

Seen from the perspective of ego-driven, bare-knuckle politics, the Robertson-Giuliani pact makes little sense. In fact, it is a coalition that both may come to rue in the weeks and months ahead. For Robertson, who has been steadily losing "audience share" on his nationally-broadcast "700 Club," it could mean a further loss of primacy with the Christian Right. For Mayor Giuliani it could also spell a loss; among 1,000 recently polled Republican voters, respondents split almost evenly on the question of whether they were more or less likely to vote for a candidate who received Robertson's endorsement. And by a 3-to-1 ratio, current Giuliani supporters said they would view the endorsement negatively.

More importantly, the Robertson endorsement points out the growing fissures and rifts within the heretofore monolithic Christian Right. In recent presidential elections, popular and powerful Christian Right leaders have tended to coalesce around a single candidate. With but a couple of months to go before primary season heats up, there is not so much as a hint of coalescence:

- **Pat Robertson** has endorsed **Rudy Giuliani**.
- Kansas Senator **Sam Brownback**, a darling of the Religious Right, has endorsed Senator **John McCain**.
- Moral Majority co-founder **Paul Weyrich** is backing **Mitt Romney**.
- Christian activist **Gary Bauer** -- himself a former presidential aspirant -- has endorsed former Tennessee Senator **Fred Thompson**.
- Baptist leader **Rick Scarborough** has thrown his support behind Governor **Mike Huckabee**.

Then too, there are those who insist that should the GOP wind up nominating Mayor Giuliani, they will go about searching for a third-party candidate who "correctly espouses" their social and cultural agenda.

Any way you view it, the Robertson-Giuliani alliance represents a potential tectonic shift in the seismic plates lying just beneath the surface of national Republican politics.

Stay tuned, because as the old Bachman-Turner Overdrive song goes, "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet."

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 15, 2007

To Impeach Or Not To Impeach: Why Is There A Question?

Its really not an easy time to be living in South Florida. Oh the weather has become a few degrees cooler and we will likely get through the hurricane season unharmed, but that's not what's making life difficult. So what are the problems? Well,

- The Dolphins are the only team in the NFL without a victory.
- The Heat, despite the return of Dwyane Wade, is a creaking disgrace.
- The Hurricanes, playing their final game at the Orange Bowl were trounced by number 23 Virginia 48-0.
- The Marlins are about to get rid of third baseman Miguel Cabrera, their only certifiable "superstar."
- The State Legislature hasn't the slightest idea of what to do about sky-rocketing property taxes.
- And, to make matters even worse, local Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz has come out against the impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney.

This last issue really grates, because, in my humble estimation, there has never been a constitutional officer more deserving of impeachment -- not to mention conviction -- than Vice President Cheney. Ever since April 24, 2007, the day Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich first offered up H. Res 333 the resolution of impeachment [[//kucinich.house.gov/UploadedFiles/int3.pdf](http://kucinich.house.gov/UploadedFiles/int3.pdf)], most House and Senate Democrats have been running for cover like scalded cats. Like Congresswoman Wasserman Schultz [whom I have interviewed, personally like and admire], the profound lack of spine being shown by her fellow Democrats has been both overwhelming and stupefying.

As I write this article H. Res 333 has, in addition to Mr. Kucinich, 22 co-sponsors, six of whom currently sit on the House Judiciary Committee. After last week's vote against tabling [which garnered the overwhelming support of House Republicans], the issue was referred to the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Liberties and Civil Rights, chaired by New York Representative Jerrold Nadler. It should be noted that of the resolution's 22 co-sponsors, only one -- Representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota's Fifth District -- sits on that subcommittee. And few are going to listen to Ellison because:

1. He is a freshman, and
2. He is a Muslim.

And there, in subcommittee, is where H. Res 333 is likely to remain.

To my mind, the question should not be *whether* impeachment proceedings against Mr. Cheney are proper; rather, its simply "what's the holdup . . . what's the downside?

To listen to the likes of Speaker Nancy Pelosi, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid or Ms. Wasserman Schultz [among others], there are a host of "good reasons" why impeachment should not be "on the table":

- **Pelosi:** *"It is a waste of time. Wouldn't they [i.e. Republicans] just love it, if we came in and our record as Democrats . . . is to talk about George Bush and Dick Cheney? This election is about them. This is a referendum about them. Making them lame ducks is good enough for me."*
- **Steny Hoyer:** *"The Speaker and I have both said impeachment, either of the president or the vice president, is not on our agenda . . . This would take us months. [The Judiciary Committee already has] "a busy agenda."*
- **Harry Reid:** *"I respectfully suggest to anyone that suggests impeachment, that it's a very foolish idea."*
- **Wasserman-Schultz:** *"[The people of America] did not ask us to spend any time on the impeachment of the Vice President. [A successful impeachment would] "squander the opportunity to move this country in a new direction . . . it would play directly into the Republican hands."*

To my way of thinking, this last comment by Ms. Wasserman Schultz -- about fear of playing directly into the hands of the Republicans -- is what most bothers all those House Democrats who won't get behind Mr. Kucinich's resolution.

Fear indeed!

In an ideal world, the job of our elected officials would be to listen to -- and then act upon -- the wishes of their constituents. In an idea world, we would not have a vice president who:

1. Manipulated intelligence to get us into Iraq.

2. Manipulated intelligence on the Iraq-Al Qaeda relationship.
3. Openly threatened aggression against the Republic of Iran.

In an ideal world, our elected officials would never place fear of what the opposition might say about them over the primacy of our Constitution. But this is obviously *not* an ideal world, and that is why so many fear being tarred with the brush of defeatism, treachery or even worse -- of being in favor of peace.

Speaker Pelosi's claim that impeachment proceedings would divert Democrats from their "great agenda" is disingenuous. She knows full well that whatever meaningful, progressive legislation may pass the House and/or Senate is likely to be vetoed by President Bush. And need she be reminded that the odds of overriding a presidential veto are roughly the same as the Dolphins winning all of their remaining games?

In poll after poll, Vice President Cheney's popularity ratings are hovering in the mid-teens. That is to say, less than two in ten Americans have a favorable view. More importantly, in recent polling, more than four in ten Americans favor impeaching the man nicknamed "Darth Vader."

Again, I ask: "Where is the downside?"

Hiding in fear, cowering in the corner is not the answer. The American public is totally fed up with this administration. Who but the most ardent fan of Sean Hannity or Michael Savage does not know that Cheney lied us into Iraq, lied about the link between Sadaam and bin Laden and is now setting his sights on Iran? Who truly believes that initiating mammoth tax cuts for the wealthiest of the wealthy at a time of war makes good economic sense? Who is willing to cough up another two or three trillion dollars for a war in which the term "victory" has no definable meaning?

Dear old dad used to say, "Let them call you pisher . . . that doesn't make you one." Let Republicans call Democrats every name in the book; they are operating under the delusion that a majority of the American public believes anything they say. Let the Democrats come out of their hiding places and begin standing up *to* the Vice President and *for* the Constitution. Get on with the hearings, and let the chips fall where they may. We just may wake up one morning and discover that the Democrats have finally located their spines and impeached the most despised, most malevolent executive officer this country has

ever known.

If nothing else, it sure will take the sting out of having to wait for another losing season here in South Florida.

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November 15, 2007 in [Impeachment](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 20, 2007

Thankful Giving

Once upon a time, the story of the first Thanksgiving was known to every American schoolchild. The names "Plymouth" and "Squanto" were a part of the fall vocabulary. Every child learned about the first settlers at Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, and how Squanto, the native American and former British slave taught them how to catch eel and grow corn. Every child knew that without Squanto, these earliest of American settlers would likely have perished.

In 1621, these brave settlers, setting apart their first harvest, held an autumn celebration of food, feasting and praising God. The governor of Plymouth invited Grand Sachem Massasoit and the Wampanoag Indians to join them in the feast. The settlers fed and entertained their guests for three days, at which point some of the natives went into the forest, killed 5 deer, and gave them to the governor as a gift.

The first Thanksgiving.

Oh how times have changed!

For most contemporary schoolchildren -- and their parents -- Thanksgiving is merely the beginning of a four-day weekend; a time given to eating everything in sight, watching football on the telly, and getting an early start on holiday shopping.

What ever happened to the true spirit of Thanksgiving?

Every president since George Washington has issued a Thanksgiving proclamation. In recent decades, it has become the custom for the president to "pardon" a turkey during the proclamation ceremony, and then make a few remarks that no one will every read, hear or remember.

Isn't there something more to Thanksgiving than turkey, yams and the Detroit Lions?

In what I understand to be the true spirit of Thanksgiving, permit me to make a couple of suggestions and observations for how we can make our holiday gather a bit more in keeping with the true historic spirit of the day:

For the past fifteen or twenty years, whenever our family gathers at my the home of cousins Linda and Jerry, we go around the table -- before the meal is served -- and one by one, talk about precisely what we are thankful for. Frequently, we have to go back to someone who has already spoken, for they have another item or two for which to give thanks. It doesn't take

much time, but definitely highlights and underscores the true meaning of the day.

This year, we will institute a new tradition: "Thankful Giving." Just before desert, we will "pass the plate." Each of the assembled family members will put whatever cash or coins they wish onto the plate. Then, Linda and Jerry will put take the proceeds, write out a check, and donate the money in the names of those assembled to a food bank. Its easy, its simple, and can mean so much to those who have to face another day or week without adequate nourishment.

I cannot take credit for "Thankful Giving." It was the brainchild of Marsha Hunt, an actress from Hollywood's "Gold Age" ["Pride and Prejudice," "Blossoms in the Dust," "The Valley of Decision"], and the longtime honorary mayor of my hometown, Sherman Oaks. Marsha, who just turned 90 last month, has a long, long record of service to humanity. A prominent member of the notorious Hollywood "Blacklist," Marsha has spent a lifetime seeking to alleviate suffering in the world.

In the late 1960s, Senator George McGovern asked Marsha to sit on the board of his "American Freedom From Hunger" organization. While on the board, she helped to organize the very first "walk-a-thon" in this country.

In the 1970s, she approached Hubert Humphrey with the idea that would eventually become "Thankful Giving." Humphrey was all for the idea, and asked Marsha to write her idea up as a piece of legislation. Seven years later, the bill passed unanimously through both the House and Senate. And although President Jimmy Carter mentioned "Thankful Giving" in his 1978 Thanksgiving Proclamation, the program was never instituted due to lack of funds.

Undaunted, the irrepressible Ms. Hunt continued to spread the word about this simple, but incredibly meaningful Thanksgiving gesture. And true to her nature, she is still pushing for "Thankful Giving" to receive the funding it needs.

So, what do you think? Care to pass the plate and engage in an act of Thankful Giving?

The most recent statistics show that more than 35 million people in America go hungry every week of the year. Worldwide, the numbers are beyond the scope of belief.

Every community in America has a food bank. There are also excellent food programs that give assistance to the hungry throughout the world. I have done a bit of research and have two links to share:

www.secondharvest.org "America's Second Harvest," in a national organization that feeds the hungry from Caribou to Carson City. Through this easily navigable website, you can find the food bank in your community.

<http://mazon.org> "Mazon: The Jewish Response to Hunger," is a California-based organization that feeds people regardless of faith, all over

the world. It also has perhaps the lowest overhead -- administrative costs -- of any charitable organization I have ever seen: about 4%. You can mail your "Thankful Giving" contribution to:

Mazon

1990 South Bundy Dr. Suite 260

Los Angeles, CA 90025

I hope you will want to do your part to help alleviate a little hunger on this planet of ours. It is in the very best spirit of our national holiday, our day for giving thanks.

Here's wishing you and yours a joyous Thanksgiving filled with Thankful Giving . . .

Kurt F. Stone

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November 20, 2007 in [Hunger](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

While We Were Sleeping

Thomas Jefferson is arguably the most learned, literate and quotable of all American presidents. He is also likely to have been the last person on earth who knew virtually everything there was to know. From architecture, structural engineering, agronomy and the law to science, Hebrew, Greek and religion [indeed, *The Jefferson Bible* is still in print], America's third president was a man without peer.

Indeed, at a 1962 White House dinner which President Kennedy hosted in honor of 49 American Nobel laureates, one of the guests suggested, " . . . there must be more intelligence gathered under this roof tonight than ever before."

"Yeah," Kennedy replied, "except when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

Jefferson also kept up a lively correspondence with literally thousands of people from around the world. One of his favorite "pen pals" was the Dutch statesman G[isjbert] K[arel] graaf van Hogendorp [1762-1834]. In a 1785 letter to van Hogendorp, Jefferson waxed eloquently on one of his favorite topics -- the importance of a free, unfettered press:

"[A despotic government] always [keeps] a kind of standing army of newswriters [sic] who, without any regard to truth or what should be like truth, [invent] and put into the papers whatever might serve the ministers. This suffices with the masses of the people who have no means of distinguishing the false from the true paragraphs of a newspaper."

Jefferson's most famous quote on the subject was encapsulated in a mere thirty words:

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

I have not a scintilla of doubt that were he alive today, the "Sage of Monticello" would be leading the charge against Federal Communication Commission Chair Kevin J. Martin's attempt to further consolidate American media ownership into the hands of fewer and

fewer giant corporations. Jefferson would be everywhere -- on editorial pages, the Internet, television and radio -- warning and railing against what Mr. Martin has been cooking up while we, the American public have been sleeping.

What are we talking about?

FCC Chair Martin has proposed to, "Do away with media ownership rules that bar companies from owning both newspaper and a television or radio station at the same time." In 2003, Martin, a former member of the Bush-Cheney transition team and general counsel for their 2000 campaign, tried to do the same thing; his effort was overturned in the landmark *Prometheus v. FCC* decision. In its ruling, the U.S. Third Circuit Court of Appeals voted 2-1 to throw out the FCC's attempt to raise the limits of cross-ownership of media. The Supreme Court later turned down an appeal; the FCC was ordered to "reconfigure how it justifies raising ownership limits."

So what's the problem?

Well, in brief, the problem is that in 1983, approximately 50 corporations controlled a majority of U.S. media -- that is, newspapers, magazines, books, TV and radio stations, movies, videos, wire services and photo agencies. By 2004, the last year for which accurate information is available, the number had shrunk to but 5 . . . count 'em, 5 corporations. For those who are interested, these unholy 5 are: Time Warner, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann of Germany, and Viacom [formally CBS]. General Electric's NBC is a close 6th.

Commissioner Martin's proposal -- which will go into effect on December 11 unless we raise the roof beams of dissent -- would not only increase multi-national corporate control over much of what is seen and heard, but also contribute to the stifling of alternate opinion and free speech.

In other words, more and more happy-talk "news stories" about Paris, Brittany and O.J., and less and less about the vital issues of the day. In other words, more and more uncritical, unvetted White House handouts on "all the success we're making in Iraq" and the absolute need to make tax cuts permanent, and less and less hard-hitting, critical news.

According to the way things are *supposed* to work, the FCC must hold public hearings before a proposal of this magnitude can take effect. And while it must be said that Commissioner Martin has abided

by the *letter* of the law, he has given an enormous, cynical raspberry to its very spirit.

Case in point, Seattle, November 9, 2007. On that day, with an absolute bare minimum of advance legal notice, Martin and his fellow FCC commissioners held a public hearing in Seattle. The presumption was that they were there to hear and receive citizen input. More than a thousand people showed up at the hearing, the vast majority of whom were solidly against consolidation. Martin, to the shock of two of the commissioners -- Michael J. Copps and Jonathan S. Adelstein -- turned a deaf ear to the thousand protesting voices, and announced the next day that he was going ahead with his dangerous plan.

What ever happened to "We the People?"

Martin's proposal, which, as mentioned above, is scheduled to take effect on December 11, is but one more instance of the selling -- indeed, the raping -- of America. This dastardly plan has been orchestrated while we, the American public has seemingly been asleep. The Martin/Bush/Cheney plan is but another in a series of "early Christmas gifts" to corporate America. Given an unfettered hand, the administration will privatize as much of America as possible, thus leaving we, the great American public, to be washed, folded, reamed, steamed and dry-cleaned by an oligarchy that prays at the divine altar of greed.

But wait, there is more!

Even as I write this piece, the FCC is meeting to vote on whether it will consider applying "broad regulations" to a cable television industry that has been largely unregulated at the federal level for more than 20 years. It should come as no surprise that Martin's latest proposal has provoked furious opposition from the cable industry. On the surface, Martin's reasoning is sound: by regulating the industry, consumers will eventually benefit through lower monthly rates. Just beneath the surface, however, lurks Martin's real interest: forcing cable outlets to remove "immoral" programs; to sanitize and homogenize what is available.

I don't get it. This is an administration that continually rails against federal involvement in everything from health care to curbing greenhouse gases, while at the time pushing for greater federal involvement in what we watch, who we marry, and what say we have in our personal lives.

So what can we do?

Three weeks ago, North Dakota Senator Byron Dorgan and 10 co-sponsors [including Democratic presidential candidates Biden, Clinton, Dodd and Obama, and Republican senators Lott and Snowe] put Senate bill 2332 into the hopper. This measure seeks to head off the FCC's consolidation plans by promoting "transparency in the adoption of new media ownership rules by the FCC, and to establish an independent panel to make recommendations on how to increase the representation of women and minorities in broadcast media ownership." As of today -- November 27, 2007 -- it is sitting in the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, chaired by Senator Daniel Inouye [D-HI]. And there it will languish, unless we do something about it.

Anyone who wishes to have a say about precisely who owns this nation's media, can sign a petition by logging on to

www.usalone.com/stop_media_consolidation.php

One can also send letters to local papers and representatives in Congress. I sent a letter just last week to Florida Senator Bill Nelson, and today received a note from him saying that he has become a co-sponsor of Senator Dorgan's bill.

This is simply too important an issue to let slip by while we are sleeping.

We will close with a last thought from Jefferson -- this from a letter he wrote to Lafayette in 1823:

"The only security of all is a free press. [When it] is completely silenced . . . all means of a general effort [are] taken away. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure."

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 04, 2007

When Good News is No News

On Monday December 3, 2007, the *New York Times* reported that the National Intelligence Estimate [NIE] has concluded that Iran put a halt to its nuclear weapons program back in 2003. According to the NIE -- a consortium of all 16 American intelligence agencies -- *"[Iran's] decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic and military costs."* For anyone who follows the current of events or indeed, is a sentient being, this should come as good news. After all, it would seem that this report is more than enough to puncture the administration's bellicose balloon; its ratcheting up of the rhetoric of war against Iran. One might have imagined that logically, the administration's dire warnings of "World War III" would now fall into desuetude like the slide rule, the rotary phone or the flash cube. To an intelligent being, it would seem that the very reason for even considering war in the first place -- the existence of a nuclear weapons program -- has now been removed.

To assume this would be both logical and consistent. It would also be wrong. To President Bush and the brains behind the throne, this bit of "good news" is, in reality, "no news."

Within 24 hours of the NIE being made public, President Bush held what must be considered one of the most disingenuous press conferences in the history of the Republic. Defying the precepts of both Aristotelian and Boolean logic, Mr. Bush:

- Warned that despite the NIE, Iran remains an ever present danger;
- Claimed that his administration's use of diplomacy and sanctions are the reason that Iran has called a halt to its nuclear weapons program;
- Concluded that the very possibility of Iran's having halted said program offers convincing evidence that they will start it up again in

the future [*"I view this report as a warning signal that they had a program. And the reason why its a warning signal is that they could restart it."*]

Got all that?

When it was pointed out that this NIE was made available to him as early as 6 -- and as late as 3 -- months ago [the time when he began talking up war with Iran], Bush replied that he had no knowledge of what it contained; merely that he had been told that there was a new report on Iran's nuclear program. Regrettably, not one member of the press asked the obvious follow-up questions: didn't you ask what was in it? And if not, why not?

Responding to the president's claim that he was not aware of the NIE's content until just the other day, Senator Joseph Biden [D-DE], Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said, "I refuse to believe that. If that's true, he has the most incompetent staff in American, modern history, and he's one of the most incompetent presidents in modern American history."

"Look," Mr. Bush explained, *"Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous, if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon What's to say that they couldn't start another covert weapon's program?"* Pushing even harder against the outer walls of logic, he termed the NIE *"A report that says what has happened in the past could be repeated, and that the policies used to get the regime to quit are effective policies."*

I don't know about you, but I seem to remember that over the past several years, this administration has steadfastly refused to engage in any diplomatic efforts whatsoever with Iran. So what "policies used to get the regime to quite" is he talking about? And why, if he had access to the NIE at least 3 months ago was he talking up World War III?

To borrow a quote from former Tennessee Senator Howard Baker, *"What did the president know and when did he know it?"*

Turning what appears on the surface to be good news into no news is a frightening turn of events. It hearkens back to George Orwell's classic *1984*, where the strategy is perpetual war, and the Outer Party's political slogan is *"War is peace, freedom is slavery, intelligence is ignorance."*

One has no other option than to conclude that this administration has long desired to strike Iran -- regardless of whether they have a nuclear weapons program or not. Even before the current NIE's release, experts predicted that Iran would not have full nuclear weapons capability until the *middle* of the next decade. And now, with the four-year gap in their program, Iran likely could not obtain that capability until the *end* of the next decade -- if at all.

This episode is the icing on the cake; it paints, in excruciatingly fine detail, the portrait of a president who has lost the last vestige of credibility.

Is it any wonder that during last week's Republican presidential "debate," that the name of President George W. Bush was only mentioned twice, while that of Senator Hillary Clinton was referred to no less than 65 times? Even his own partisans see him as damaged goods.

When good news is no news, that's bad news.

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 13, 2007

Article VI Clause 3: America's Eleventh Commandment

According to an adage from humankind's hoary-headed past, one should not engage in public discussion of either politics or religion. Boy, did my parents ever miss the boat on that one.

You see, my middle name is Franklin. About bestowing that name, my parents, Alice and Henry, were in total agreement. About precisely *whom* they were honoring that, as they say, was another *geschichte*, another story.

According to Henry, the name Franklin was in honor and memory of *his* paternal grandfather, a revered leader of the Jewish community in late 19th, early 20th century Baltimore. I guess he wanted me to follow in the great man's footsteps. According to Alice, the name was in honor and memory of the recently deceased FDR. Perhaps she had visions of her scrawny newborn growing up to become President of the United States.

Names must have an evocative, motivating power, for in a sense, I have responded to the duality inherent in that middle name: I became a rabbi who has spent the better part of a lifetime working in -- and writing about -- politics. And of course, I have consistently disobeyed the old saw about not discussing religion or politics in public -- or on the pulpit for that matter.

I rationalize that its OK, because after all, *I'm* not running for office.

The 2008 presidential race is, I'm afraid to say, a horse of a totally different hue. Questions about Darwinism-versus-Creationism, the infallibility of the Bible and whether Muslims, Mormons or non-believers can gain entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven abound. Candidates -- especially on the Republican side of the aisle -- feel the dire necessity of putting their various religious creeds, beliefs and practices on public display. It has gotten to the point that without religious testimony, there is no electoral victory.

Believe it or not, this is a rather new phenomenon. For the first 175-180 years of our history, personal religious scruples played a minuscule role in presidential politics. Why? Because of Article VI, Clause 3 of our Constitution, which states in part:

". . . no religious Test shall ever be required as Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." [sic]

Indeed, it is highly unlikely that voters knew what church the various presidents attended or where they stood on issues of doctrinal import. The wall of separation between church and state, between parochialism and the presidency was wide and -- for the most part -- immutable. Oh yes, in the 1800 presidential race John Adams, a Unitarian, did accuse the Episcopalian-bred Deist Thomas Jefferson of "endeavoring to destroy religion," and even went so far as to call him "the anti-Christ." And in turn, Jefferson -- who defeated Adams -- retaliated by accusing Adams of being a "Puritan pope and a religious tyrant."

This episode, sorry as it may have been, turned out to be the rare exception, definitely not the rule. One suspects that candidates from "Jemmy" Madison on had a deep-seated respect for Article VI, Clause 3. One might also suspect that voters were far more interested in what positions the candidates espoused than what pew they occupied.

Yes, John F. Kennedy did address concerns about his Catholicism back in 1960, and Mitt Romney's father George did talk about his Mormonism once in 1968. In Kennedy's case, he was seeking to allay fears that he might put the papacy above the presidency. In the senior Romney's case, he was specifically addressing the Mormon Church's position on Blacks.

It all seems like a century ago.

In recent years, a growing segment of the American voting public -- spurred by the rise of the Religious Right and so-called "values voters" -- has made one's personal religious scruple into a matter of public concern. While millions of people are terrified at the prospect of casting their vote for a candidate who seriously questions Darwinian evolution, many millions would greatly prefer seeing a Creationist in the White House. And while countless millions are more than willing to cast their vote for a woman, a Black, a Hispanic or a Catholic -- the Democratic lineup -- there are countless millions who would not deign to vote for a Mormon. I find it intriguing that amongst the six most serious Democratic hopefuls [Clinton, Obama, Edwards, Dodd, Biden and Richardson] none has ever been divorced. Contrast this to the five leading Republican contenders [Giuliani, Romney, Thompson, McCain and Huckabee], who account for no less than four divorces. And yet, which party's candidates are quickest to tout their Christian *bona fides*?

To listen to some Republican candidates and strategists, the issues of greatest importance to the American voting public are stem cell research, a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage and

the total outlawing of abortion. In order to even qualify for the nomination then, Republican candidates must first pass some sort of moral values test. And in order to do this -- and move even further ahead of the pack -- they must then reassure one and all that they -- and not their opponents -- are God's favorite candidate.

I don't know about you, but I am highly offended when Mike Huckabee runs a television spot with the words "Christian Leader" emblazoned on the screen. I am angry as hell when Mitt Romney has to defend his religion against the charge that it is nothing more than a perverse cult [something which an eye popping 35% of the public believes]. I am dumbfounded when candidates pander by proclaiming that they are all that stands between a Christian nation and the religion of "Godless secularism." I thought they were running for nomination, not beatification.

What in the world does this have to do with being an effective president? In a word: nothing.

What in the world does this have to do with securing the Republican nomination? In a word: everything.

I for one could not care a fig if a presidential candidate believes that Jesus is both God and the son of God. Its really none of my business whether one goes to Confession, speaks in tongues or eschews bacon ham or shrimp. And whether or not a candidate believes every single word of the Bible is really beside the point.

My question is not about the Bible; its about the Constitution of the United States.

Years ago, Ronald Reagan promulgated what he called the Republican's "Eleventh Commandment." To wit, "Thou shalt not speak badly about any fellow Republican." To my way of thinking he got it wrong. The Eleventh Commandment should be: "Thou shalt not ignore the Constitution of the United States." By making religion such a central focus of their campaigns, Republican hopefuls -- with the able assistance of inane debate hosts and values voters from Maine to California -- are violating the very spirit -- if not the letter -- of Article VI, Clause 3.

Dear candidates: Please answer a simple question.

Do you or do you not believe that the Constitution is the law of the land?

And if not, why not?

There's Good News Tonight!

Back in the dark days of World War II -- a conflict that -- unbelievably -- took less time than our current mission in Iraq -- radio commentator Gabriel Heatter [1890-1972] used to open up each night's broadcast with the words "*There's good news tonight!*" A troubled man with a host of fears and phobias, Heatter nonetheless felt it his mission to present the American public with a nightly broadcast that accentuated the positive. Heatter had a well known penchant for stories about heroic dogs -- despite a deep-seated phobia for canines not his own.

Despite having a huge audience that made this conflicted man a national icon, Heatter did have his critics; writers and commentators who found his newscasts sickeningly saccharine. Indeed, one wag composed a particularly lacerating bit of doggerel that went "*Disaster has no cheerier greeter/than gleeful, gloating Gabriel Heatter.*"

It is with both a consummate love of all dogs and, so far as I know, only one identifiable phobia [*reactionophobia* -- a fear of reactionaries] that I borrow Heatter's iconic sign-on: *THERE'S GOOD NEWS TONIGHT!*

So what's -- or in this case, *who's* -- the "good news?"

To be precise, its Connecticut Senator Chris Dodd. For in standing up to both the United States Senate and the Bush Administration, Dodd has -- at least for the nonce -- put the kibosh on granting legal protection to the phone carriers that helped with the National Security Agency's [NSA] eavesdropping program. As many already know, the Bush Administration has been pushing for immediate passage of legislation to grant immunity to phone companies as part of a broader expansion of the NSA's wiretapping authorities -- already an egregious encroachment on civil liberties.

First a bit of history.

This past August, Congress hastily approved expanded powers for the NSA in a vote that many Democrats regretted. That temporary legislation is due to expire on February 1, 2008. The Administration had hoped that the Senate would pass S. 2248, the "FISA Amendments Act of 2007" -- including the immunity provision -- before the end of the Congressional session, so that an agreement could be worked out with the House. [Note:

the House approved a wiretapping measure of its own last month that *did not* include immunity.

Enter Senator Dodd who, returning from snowy clime of Iowa where he is running for President, spent the better part of this past Monday attacking the idea of giving immunity to such national carriers as Verizon and AT&T. [Note: there are currently more than 40 lawsuits pending against these and other major phone companies over their "alleged" cooperation in the eavesdropping program.]

Because of Senator Dodd's relentless assault – and his threat to filibuster the measure – Majority Leader Harry Reid [D-NV] had no choice but to scuttle consideration of S. 2248 until the new Congress convenes in January. In announcing that time had run out for debating the measure, Senator Reid said, "Democrats are committed to improving our nation's intelligence laws, while protecting Americans' civil liberties . . . We need to take the time necessary to debate a bill that does just that, rather than rushing one through the legislative process."

Senator Dodd's comments were more directly on point: *"Today we have scored a victory for American civil liberties and sent a message to President Bush that we will not tolerate his abuse of power and veil of secrecy The president should not be above the rule of law, nor should the telecom companies who supported this quest to spy on American citizens."*

Predictably, the White House -- through spokesman Tony Fratto -- was "very disappointed." "Each day of delay," Fratto said, "brings us closer to reopening a dangerous intelligence gap that we closed last summer."

Shades of the so-called "missile gap" of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Once again, the administration, along with its henchmen and henchwomen on Capitol Hill, has been seeking to eat away at American civil liberties using the astringent of fear. If one reads between the lines, what the White House is saying is, "Anyone who goes against the entire legislative package -- including retroactive immunity -- will be labeled 'soft on terrorism.'" One can already hear Limbaugh, Levin, Hannity and Savage calling Senator Dodd "Osama bin Laden's best friend," or decrying "godless liberals who are only too willing to deliver America into the hands of their most murderous enemies."

The Senate will take up consideration of S. 2248 when it reconvenes in January. There are many versions of this bill floating around Capitol Hill,

the worst of which comes out of Senator Jay Rockefeller's Committee on Intelligence. Rockefeller's [D-WV] version is the one that includes retroactive immunity. What this means is that were the bill to pass, major telecom companies would be held free and faultless *tomorrow* for what is *today* a clear violation of federal law. I thought our federal Constitution specifically banned *ex post facto* laws -- namely laws that "retroactively change the legal consequences of acts committed or the legal status of facts and relationships that existed prior to the enactment of a specific law." If Senator Rockefeller's immunity clause isn't a prime example of *ex post facto*, then I'm an All-Pro running back. And believe me, I'm no all Adrian Peterson.

Even without the retroactive immunity provision, S. 2248 is a frightening, highly-flawed piece of legislation. If the Senate will only follow Senator Dodd's lead, they will enact a bill that will:

1. Support individualized warrants and restore real protections against interceptions of communications of American citizens inside the United States.
2. Push for oversight of past illegal surveillance and recognize that oversight can increase accountability without jeopardizing national security and exposing classified documents, and
3. Adopt a reasonable sunset provision and make sure that the next administration is obligated to review the laws and respond to continually voiced concerns regarding government surveillance.

What all this means is that we, the people, have to get our pens, our phones and our computers ready. We have to make everyone from Harry Reid to the chap who keeps the snuff boxes filled [yes, they still have snuffboxes in the Senate Cloak Rooms!] know that an America that continues to support warrantless wiretaps without oversight is an America teetering on the abyss of totalitarianism.

Thank God for Senator Dodd.

Even Gabriel Heater would be pleased . . .

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Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 27, 2007

Why Do Feel I Like Andy Rooney?

What is a "curmudgeon?" Well, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, a *curmudgeon* is "A crusty irascible cantankerous old person full of stubborn ideas." The American Heritage Dictionary defines *curmudgeon* as "An ill-tempered person full of resentment and stubborn ideas."

No one knows the precise etymology of the word, although ye olde Dr. Samuel Johnson, in a moment of puckish delight, tried to pull a fast one by suggesting it came from the French *coeur méchant*, literally, an "evil heart." My money backs those who claim that the first syllable of the word -- *cur* "a dog" -- says it all.

In our workaday world, the greatest exemplar of *curmudgeonism*, to coin an abstraction, would have to be 60 Minutes' Andy Rooney. I would daresay that few amongst the vast American TV viewing public are not familiar with the curmudgeonly Mr. Rooney. After all, for more than two decades, Mr. Rooney has spent two or three minutes every Sunday evening railing against something that drives him to distraction -- tattoos, faulty Christmas presents, the cost of groceries, annoying relatives -- you name it. And although true cognoscenti take his rants with a large dose of salt [he is, at root, an entertainer], for most people, he nonetheless comes off as the Platonic Absolute of -- you guessed it -- the curmudgeon's curmudgeon.

OK, now that we've finished our excursion into the realm of etymology and spent a couple of sentences on Andy Rooney, why the great interest in grouches, sourpusses, cranks, bears and crosspatches? And why oh why do I find myself feeling like Andy Rooney's bastard stepson?

Well, let me tell you.

I woke up today at 7:00, had a cuppa Earl Grey [Harrod's, with extra Lavender] then got down to my morning tasks. One of the first things on my agenda was registering the service contract on the multi-purpose printer I purchased yesterday at Office Depot. According to the form they provided me, registering online was as simple as 1-2-3. Just go to their sight, answer a few simple questions, provide a few identifying numbers and Voila! Covered for the next two years. Or, if I wished, I could do the whole thing simply by calling an 800 number. As Tom Lehrer sang in the satiric "New Math,"

It's so simple

So very simple

That only a child can do it!

Starting at 9:00, I went online, and hit a snag on the very first e-page; it told me that the phone number -- my home phone number mind you -- was incorrect! I tried again . . . and again. . . and again. Temperature rising, I said to myself: *Self, you've never claimed to be an Einstein, but you do bloody well know your own home number!*

So, I called the local Home Depot where the printer had been purchased, and asked to speak to the manager. After waiting for precisely seven-and-one-half minutes, the manager came on the line, listened to my problem, and told me to call the 800 number . . . which I did.

With waxing systolic, I looked forward to speaking to someone -- anyone -- who could help me complete the simple task of registering the service warrant. Guess again. All I got was their #@!%&!! automated, voice-activated system. The first indignity came with the initial taped request:

"Please spell your last name, slowly, letter-by-letter."

S-T-O-N-E

"We have that as F-P-O-M-E. If this is correct, please say Yes; if not, please say No."

NO!!

"Please spell your last name, slowly, letter-by-letter."

ESS-TEE-O-EN-EE

"We have that as F-P-O-M-G. If this is correct, please say Yes; if not, please say No."

God how I loathe these automated voice-activated systems! I don't mind chatting up some tekki in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Kuala Lumpur; I have no problem dealing with someone named Hassan, Fakhruddin or Datuk. At least they are real live sentient beings. This automated voice-activated world is something straight out of Dante's *Inferno*.

Almost chucking the phone into the swimming pool, I thought better, hung up, and called back to Office Depot, once again requesting to speak to the manager. After holding for almost 11 minutes, the line went dead. God Bless Bellsouth.

Returning to my computer, I went back online. This time I decided to type in my phone number *sans* dashes between the number clusters. Yureka! It worked! So why couldn't they have somewhere written that the 10-digit number should not be written without dashes or ampersands?

Because "So simple, so very simple, that only a child can do it . . ."

After giving my name, address and phone number -- minus the dashes -- I had to fill in such information as date of purchase, make, model and serial number, etc. The online screen told me that this last bit of information was

to be found "either on your receipt or somewhere on the merchandise purchased." But where? The cash register receipt was longer than a Biblical cubit, and the multi-purpose printer contained more numerical series than the entire U.S. Tax Code.

Diastolic now approaching my 5-digit address, I swallowed hard and put in one of the 12-letter/number series . . . WRONG. I tried a second . . . WRONG. Well, that left just one letter/number series, so it had to be the correct one. I slowly entered the code, sat back and admired my handiwork, and began feeling almost human. With a dramatic push of the index finger, my printer was about to become covered . . . until

THE SYSTEM IS EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES. PLEASE TRY AGAIN LATER.

It was time for a second . . . and third . . . and fourth cuppa Earl Grey.

We live in a truly amazing world. One can locate literally thousands of websites dealing with *Ornithorhynchus anatinus* [the Duck-Billed Platypus], the *Elephantine papyri* [Jewish manuscripts dating back to the 5th century B.C.E.] or Gombin, Poland [my late father-in-law's birthplace] within less than 3 seconds. We can hold the world's accumulated wisdom in the palm of a hand and find our way around the wilds of Borneo with a GPS. And yet, it is getting next to impossible to speak with a real live human being on the phone. To my way of thinking, this is the absolute cruelest, most diabolic form of outsourcing ever invented.

I'm beginning to understand and feel a lot like Andy Rooney. . .

Wishing you a Happy, Healthy, and Peaceful secular New Year from Anna, myself, our family and all the critters . . .

Kurt F. Stone

By the way, I did finally get my printer covered by the two-year warranty. How I did it is a saga for another time . . .

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There's Something About Iowa

In just a couple of days, America's "formal" presidential election season begins in a big way with the Iowa Caucus. If I had a dollar for everyone who has asked me, "what's a caucus and how does it differ from a primary?", I'd be able to retire.

It is therefore with pleasure that I offer a baker's dozen-worth of questions-and-answers on what's about to happen in the Hawkeye State.

1. So what is a presidential precinct caucus, anyway?

A caucus is essentially a meeting of local political party activists who convene to express their candidate preferences. As is the case in most caucus states, Iowa's precinct meetings start a multi-tiered process that will culminate at the state party conventions with the final selection and allocation of the state's delegates to the national Democratic and Republican Party conventions.

2. How does a caucus differ from a primary election?

Unlike a caucus, a primary is carried out in a virtually identical manner to a general election contest, with participants going to polling place or, depending on state election procedures, voting at home for their preferred candidates. A primary election attracts a broader swath of the electorate, in part because it requires a shorter time commitment. A caucus takes longer to conduct and tends to attract dedicated party activists.

3. It seems as though the Iowa caucuses are always the first event of the presidential nomination season. Why is that?

The precinct caucuses have been the kickoff presidential nominating event since 1972, when the Democratic Party scheduled them for Jan. 24. Since 1976, Democrats and Republicans have held their caucuses on the same date. Until that era, Iowa's caucuses had been extremely low-profile and weren't the media circus they are today. But the 1972 and 1976 Democratic contests helped turn the precinct caucuses into a major force in presidential selection: the stronger-than-expected

performance by South Dakota Sen. George McGovern in the first of those events and by former Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter in the latter helped boost both to the party's nomination, which in turn turned future Iowa precinct events into media magnets. Iowa officials since have zealously guarded their state's tradition as the host of the kickoff nomination contest.

4. Where are these caucuses held?

In a wide variety of locations such as schools, churches, community centers, public libraries and even private homes. Democrats and Republicans will hold caucuses in each of Iowa's nearly 1,800 precincts; in some places, both party's caucuses will be held in the same locations.

5. How many people show up to caucus?

It depends on a contest's competitiveness, but usually about 10 to 20 percent of a party's voters will participate in the caucuses. About 124,000 people participated in the 2004 Iowa Democratic caucuses. [There were no Republican contests that year because President Bush was unopposed for renomination.]

6. Who can participate in a precinct caucus?

Any Iowa resident can participate, provided he or she is 18 years of age or will be by November 4, 2008, the date of the general election.

To participate in a party's caucus, a voter must have previously registered as a member of that party or chooses to register with the party on caucus night. Any prospective participant must show up at the caucus site by 7 p.m. central time, when the caucus begins.

7. Isn't Jan. 3 awfully early to hold precinct caucuses?

Yes, it's by far the earliest date for the Iowa caucuses -- so early in fact, that it occurs just two days after New Year's Day. This could be a problem for lots of football fans who may want to watch the Orange Bowl game between Virginia Tech and Kansas. This early date is a result of the accelerated "front loading" of the presidential nominating schedule: the 2008 Iowa caucuses were originally penciled in for Monday, January 14. They shifted to the earlier date because other states moved up *their* nominating events and impinged on Iowa's first-in-the-nation status. Previously, the Iowa caucuses had been held no earlier than January 19, the date on which they were held in both 1976 and 2004.

8. So what exactly will happen on the evening of Jan. 3?

Republican and Democrats voters will gather that evening at their respective precinct caucus locations, ostensibly to elect delegates to the county conventions in March and to conduct other party business.

The caucus process is fairly simple for the *Republicans*, who will cast a nonbinding straw vote for their preferred candidate before moving on to other party business.

The *Democratic* process is more complex. Caucus attendees will divide up into candidate preference groups. Generally speaking, a preference group needs to have 15 percent of caucus attendees to be considered “viable” — meaning that the group is eligible to elect delegates to a county convention. So a candidate at a precinct caucus that has 100 attendees would need the support of 15 people to form a viable candidate preference group.

After caucus attendees divide up into preference groups, those who are in non-viable groups or are not committed to any candidate are allowed time to realign with other candidates’ groups. After this period of realignment, county convention delegates are allocated among the candidate preference groups, and the results are then phoned in to the state Democratic Party.

9. What can you tell me about the results that are reported?

You’ll see a raw vote total for the *Republicans*. In the 2000 Republican caucus, for example, George W. Bush received about 36,000 of the approximately 89,000 votes that were cast in the straw poll -- 41% of the total. Bush out-poll publisher Steve Forbes [30%], former ambassador Alan Keyes [14%], and conservative political activist Gary Bauer [9%]. Arizona Senator John McCain, who bid for the 2000 nomination but did not campaign in the Iowa caucuses that year, received 5%.

The *Democrats* report their caucus results in terms of each candidate’s projected delegate strength at the state convention in June — using a calculation known as State Delegate Equivalents [SDE]. There’s a reason for this. The January 3 precinct caucuses will elect delegates to county conventions that are of different sizes; the county convention in Carroll County, for example, will include 155 delegates who will be elected January 3, while the county convention for Tama County will include 85 delegates who will be elected January 3.

The state party weights each county’s delegate allotment to the June state convention based on its raw Democratic vote in the 2004 presidential and 2006 governor’s contests, compared to the statewide Democratic vote. Carroll and Tama will have differently sized county

conventions, but they actually have the same delegate allotment [16] at the state convention — which is fixed at 2,500 delegates — because both counties each gave the same cumulative total of votes in 2004 to Democrat John Kerry and in 2006 to Democrat Chet Culver. That complicated scenario explains why the party releases the results as SDEs.

In the 2004 Democratic caucuses, Kerry's reported total of 37.6% reflected his anticipated delegate strength at the state Democratic convention. It did not mean that Kerry was supported by 37.6% of all Democratic caucus attendees.

10. If the purpose of the Iowa caucuses is to elect delegates to the county convention, then why do the results of the Iowa precinct caucuses receive so much national attention?

Because the media widely interpret the precinct caucuses as an important early test of each candidate's viability and his or her campaign organization, even though no national convention delegates are selected at the event. The caucuses have become such a media magnet that the intense focus on who won and who lost — or, more accurately, who exceeded expectations and who did not meet them — can help make or break candidates. And this comes well before the overwhelming majority of primary and caucus voters elsewhere in the nation have had an opportunity to vote or even weigh in about their choices.

11. How often does the winner of the Iowa Precinct caucuses go on to win the nomination?

Most, but not all of the time. In 2004, John Kerry hurdled to Democratic front-runner status after a late surge in Iowa propelled him to victory. Eight days later, Kerry won the New Hampshire primary; he effectively clinched the Democratic nomination after sweeping the primaries a few weeks later.

In 2000, George W. Bush, then the governor of Texas, won the Republican Iowa caucuses and Vice President Al Gore easily won those on the Democratic side. Bush lost to McCain eight days later in New Hampshire, where Gore won narrowly. But both Bush and Gore recovered from those subpar showings to easily clinch their parties' nominations.

In 1988, Kansas Republican Sen. Bob Dole and Missouri Democratic Rep. Richard A. Gephardt won the Iowa caucuses, but neither won their party's nomination. Dole lost out to George H.W. Bush, the

current president's father, while the Democratic nomination went to Michael S. Dukakis.

12. Can a presidential candidate fare poorly in Iowa and still recover and win the nomination?

Historical caucus results have spawned a conventional wisdom that there are "three tickets out of Iowa." In every contested Iowa caucus since 1972, only once has a presidential candidate finished worse than third and then gone on to become his party's presidential candidate. At that time -- the 1992 Democratic caucuses, when Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton finished fourth was an aberration: Iowa Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin was on the ballot and his opponents did not actively challenge his "favorite son" status in his home state.

Third-place Iowa finishers who went on to win their party's nomination include Bush in 1988, when he lost to Dole and religious broadcaster Pat Robertson in Iowa but went on to win the nomination and defeat Dukakis in the general election.

Dukakis also finished third in the Iowa caucuses. But in this case, his showing was portrayed as a success. First-place finisher Gephardt and Illinois Sen. Paul Simon, the runner-up, represented states that border Iowa and faced much higher expectations for success than a candidate from Massachusetts.

Got all that? If not, don't worry. It's taken some of us years just to figure out just where in the heck Iowa is.

But you've got to admit: there *is* something about Iowa.

Let the games begin!

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