

# **Beating the Bushes:**

All Politics, All The Time

January 09, 2008

## **The Swift Boating of Barak Obama**

While hosting a dinner party at our home the other night, one of our guests -- a 30ish attorney with an MBA -- asked me out of the blue: "So what do you think about Osama?" Catching the devilish glint in his eye, and knowing of his penchant for being a contrarian, I quickly gleaned that he was referring not to Osama bin Laden, but rather to Barak Obama. Initially, I decided to play dumb:

"I think he is a mass murderer masquerading as a Muslim Messiah."

From the look on his face, I could tell he was disappointed that I hadn't taken the bait.

"No, I'm talking about Osama, the guy running for president," he said somewhat churlishly.

"First of all," I said, a bit heatedly, "his name is SENATOR Barak Hussein OBAMA, not OSAMA, and secondly, please don't tell me you're one of those unfortunate souls who've fallen for this barrel of b.s."

"All I know is what I hear," he said, "and from what I've heard, this guy's bad news."

The conversation didn't get much better. The only saving grace was that I knew he was living up to his contrarian self, and probably didn't really believe what he was saying. He was likely just trying to get a rise out of me. Nonetheless, it was terribly unsettling.

The very next morning, I received an email from my assistant and man-of-all-work Art. The email title was "Obama Misinformation?" It turned out to be an email that a friend had forwarded to him containing the normal rants and baseless charges against Senator Obama, such as

- He is the son of a radical Muslim
- His middle name is Muhammad
- His mother was an atheist
- He was indoctrinated at a Wahabi *midrasa* in Indonesia
- He refuses to stand during the National Anthem
- He took his senatorial oath of office on a copy of the *Koran*
- His church -- Trinity Church of Christ --is both racist and anti-American

Not wishing to either rehash or dignify these phony charges with any words of defense, I merely sent Art several Internet links. For anyone interested in debunking these baseless myths, please go to [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com) put in the word "Obama," and follow the many links that will appear. They provide the truth about Senator Obama . . .

Now, the main issue here is why the Internet is being flooded with all these mendacious emails; why newspapers and so-called political Blogs are continuing the frontal assault -- call it "Swift Boating" -- of a United States Senator running for President of the United States.

In a word: racism.

It is an undeniable fact of political life that the front-runners are always subjected to far more scrutiny than the also-rans. And, for the 120 hours between his victory in Iowa and his second-place finish in New Hampshire, Barak Obama was the front-runner. Of course, in the seesaw battle betwixt Senators Clinton, Obama and Edwards, that could all change once they get to Nevada or South Carolina, not to mention Florida, California or New York.

For the moment, however, Barak Obama is the one running around with a bulls-eye on his back. Truth to tell, from everything I have read, from my encounters and conversations with Obama's people, he's is pretty much what he seems to be: a classy, earnest, incredibly articulate, passionate man who, more than most, has the talent to both inspire and uplift.

So what's the problem?

Some claim that the main drawback with Barak Obama comes in the area of experience; he's only been a senator for two years. [*It should be noted here, by the way, that sitting senators rarely win the presidency. The last two were JFK in 1960 and Warren G. Harding in 1920*]. I for one think this issue of experience is, frankly, overblown. 138 years ago, America elected as president, a man who had served but a single term in the House of Representatives -- a full 14 years before his election. That man was Abraham Lincoln, who went on to become -- unquestionably -- this nation's greatest president.

To my way of thinking, a president does not have to be a genius in all areas of governance. Rather, he or she needs vision, common sense, and the ability to bring the so-called "best and brightest" into their administration. They also have to be articulate and passionate enough to inspire, instruct and uplift.

This world of nonsense about Senator Obama's so-called "Muslim indoctrination" is just that -- stuff and nonsense. Those who are pushing and re-pushing the issue are, in my estimation, using the "M word" where two generations ago, they would have likely been using the "N word."

Yes, the underpinning of all these false reports is nothing more, nothing less than bad old-fashioned American racism. That people are so brazen, so deluded and base as to accuse Senator Obama of being a Muslim "Manchurian Candidate" is odious. That people are willing to accept these charges as being true is beyond comprehension. Then again, Grandpa Doc used to say "the masses are asses."

As practiced in America, politics is a full contact, no-holds-barred sport, where the ends -- victory -- generally justify the means. It is one thing to vet a candidate's record in the hope of finding inconsistency, a bone-headed vote or some youthful indiscretion. It is another to turn a candidate into America's worst fear: a ticking time bomb sent to destroy the country of his birth.

I for one am as yet undecided on just who my candidate will be. I think the Democrats have fielded one of the most attractive, talented fields in years. Indeed, I could proudly cast a vote for Clinton, Edwards, Obama or Richardson without a moment's hesitation in the general election. That

the Democrats offer this nation the possibility of electing the first woman, African American or Hispanic president says volumes about both the party and the country. But to fall victim to the tenebrous shadows of 19th or 20th century racism is indeed, to fall from grace.

America should be better than that . . .

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January 09, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

January 16, 2008

### A Lesson From Sinai

As this article is being written, Air Force One is touching down at Andrews Air Force Base; President Bush's eight-day tour of the Middle East has come to an end. From Jerusalem and Ramallah to Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAR, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Mr. Bush scurried about pushing his dream of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, seeking allies in his war of wits with Iran, and talking up the superiority of democracy over any other form of government. He also urged Saudi Arabia and other OPEC nations to consider the strain that high oil prices are having on the U.S. economy.

The Saudi response to heartfelt suggestion that they up oil production was essentially "Go pound sand."

Undaunted, the Bush administration notified Congress of its intention to sell the Saudis \$120 million in precision-guided bombs.

Yes siree, *that's* showin' them Ayrabs!

From articles appearing in the international Arab press, it would seem that the Muslim-in-the-street was less than overwhelmed by the American president's visit. Only in Israel -- where his popularity ratings are just a tad higher than they are here at home -- did he meet with anything even approaching approbation.

One cannot help but wonder how well President Bush understands the Middle East. To aver that the Israelis and Palestinians will find rapprochement in their decades-old struggle by the end of his presidency is -- sorry to say -- phantasmagoric at best, delusional at worst.

Why?

For the past five years or so, President Bush has made it abundantly clear that his administration's suggested cure to what ails the Middle East is democracy. Well, I'm here to tell you that as idealistic and admirable as that may be on paper, it is anything but in reality.

To understand this, permit me to don my yarmulke and write not as a political op-ed blogger who happens to be an ordained rabbi, but as an ordained rabbi who happens to be a political op-ed blogger.

Everyone, I am reasonably certain, is familiar with the Biblical story of the Exodus -- even if its the Cecil B. De Mille version. We should all remember how once freed from 400 years of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites

- Crossed the Red Sea [actually *yam suf*, the "Sea of Reeds"],
- Received the Ten Commandments,
- Dined on manna,
- Moaned, groaned and kvetched,
- Built the Golden Calf,
- Mistrusted both God and Moses,
- Sent 12 spies [or scouts] out to check out the land of Canaan, and
- Eventually, after 40 long and grueling years, entered the Promised Land.

For the rabbis of old, one of the things that fascinated them most was why all this took 40 years; why God chose not to lead them on a straight path that would have taken only 6 or 7 weeks. Direct textual evidence provides one answer: God was punishing the former slaves for their lack of trust, their effrontery and their utter faithlessness.

Rabbinic commentary, however, provides a far more telling answer.

One will recall that with the exception of Joshua bin Nun of the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb ben Jephunneh [*Y'funeh*] of the tribe of Judah, all those who crossed over into Canaan were born en route. In other words, although they were the sons and daughters, the grandsons and granddaughters of slaves, they were not themselves the children of slavery; they were the children of freedom.

From this, the rabbis discovered and taught an ineluctable truth: that while it is terribly easy -- though deeply lamentable and wrong -- to make a free person into a slave, it is horribly difficult -- though incredibly praiseworthy -- to make a slave into a free person. *This* is why, the rabbis taught, God made the Children of Israel wander about in Sinai those 40 long years, rather than sending them directly from Egypt to Canaan.

This, it seems to me, is precisely the lesson that has escaped our president and his administration; that the road from slavery [or tyranny or despotic tribal monarchy] to democracy [or freedom] is fraught with ruts, rills and potholes 'aplenty.

Then too, Democracy as practiced in the United States of America is not necessarily the ideal paradigm for whatever will pass for Democracy with the Arab world. Its the old "regrettably there are times when you get what you prayed for" syndrome.

The Palestinian paradigm is but one example.

When the Palestinians went to the polls for the first time, they freely and overwhelmingly voted for Hamas, an armed Islamic movement. That's who voters freely decided best represented their interests and aspirations. So what did the Bush Administration do? It flatly refused to recognize Hamas.

What sort of a signal or lesson did this communicate to the Muhammed or Fatima in the street? That the Bush Administration supports Democratic elections only when the results coincide with its policy objectives? That there is a decided double standard when it comes to Democracy in the Middle East? That the Bush Administration "talks the talk" but refuses to "walk the walk?"

Don't get me wrong; I believe that Democracy is the best form of government in the world -- for those who can handle it. But just as the rabbis of old taught, its a terrible long road from slavery to freedom -- one that cannot be traversed in a few weeks [or a single election or even a single generation.]

The journey from slavery to freedom -- in modern parlance, from tyranny or tribal monarchy to Democracy -- is one that indeed should be encouraged nurtured, supported. But to expect its progress to seamless, unimpeded or closely resembling the American experience is both foolish and shortsighted.

In most Western religions, the concept *imitatio Deo* [literally "imitating the Divine"] is of paramount importance. In Judaism, as an example, we are taught: "Just as God is merciful, you should be merciful; just as God is just, you should be just . . . etc." For purposes of this piece, we do well to remember that one of the Divine attributes is patience. In other words, just as *God* is infinitely patient, we must exercise patience."

Not only is this a lesson from Sinai; it is a lesson in *real politic*.

And since I have written this piece while wearing my *kippah* [yarmulke], I will end with the words *Amen, ken y'hi ratzon*

In other words, "Amen, may it be God's will . . ."

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January 16, 2008 in [Israel and the Middle East](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## Beating the Bushes:

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January 24, 2008

### What This Country Needs Is . . .

Without question, Thomas Riley Marshall (1854-1925) is one of the more obscure figures in American political history. A former Indiana governor and Vice President under Woodrow Wilson, Marshall was one of the drollest, wittiest politicians in American history. Marshall, who really didn't like being Vice President, had a wonderfully self-deprecating sense of humor:

- *"A mother had two sons. One ran away and went to sea, the other became Vice President of the United States. Neither one was ever heard from again."*
- One day, Marshall, while sitting with his feet propped up on his desk, noticed a large group of tourists gawking at him as if he were an item on display. Emerging from his office, he told the visitors, *"If you look upon me as a wild animal, please be kind enough to throw peanuts at me."*
- Marshall is best remembered -- if indeed, at all -- for a single comment he supposedly uttered one day in 1917: *"What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar."*

As is the case with many legendary quips, it is likely that Marshall never said it. More than one political trivia junkie has told me that the statement originated with a then-popular cartoon character named "Abe Martin" The fictional Martin was a country bumpkin who sounded a lot like satirist Will Rogers.

The precise origin of Marshall's "five-cent cigar" witticism is completely irrelevant. What is totally relevant however, is the serious truth that lurks just beneath its surface: that democracies work best when citizens are engaged, when the populace is challenged to achieve a great goal together. It is precisely this -- the great challenge -- that has been totally lacking in American society for the past several generations.

When was the last time a leader or public figure -- *any* leader or public figure -- challenged the American public to do something more than go shopping? How long has it been since we, the American people, have been left out of the democratic equation? Is there nothing more required of us than to breathe, eat, sleep, pay as little tax as possible and then, once every four years, perhaps vote for evil of two lessers? When was the last time a candidate for the presidency issued not a platform of promises but a clarion call to challenge?

Give up? Its been a long, long time.

Back in 1932, FDR told a battered and broken nation that there was "nothing to fear but fear itself." In so doing, he represented a sea change from the overall rapacity and high-living of the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover years. During World War II, he inspired Americans of all ages to join in a great campaign. Everywhere from Caribou to Covina people were saving string, newspapers, and aluminum foil, buying savings bonds and working together toward a common goal. One need only look at contemporary photos in *Life*, *Look* and *The Saturday Evening Post* to see the effects of his great challenge: people appearing not as individuals, but in groups, and generally with their arms around each others' shoulders.

FDR and his administration created the "Manhattan Project," which melded the financial, intellectual and technological powers of America, Canada and England into a long-odds campaign with a short-term goal: to create an atomic bomb that would hasten the end of World War II. FDR accomplished his goal in less than five years.

In 1960, JFK challenged the American public to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Like FDR, he too represented a sea-change from the stodgy, fear-enveloped fifties. Kennedy, who was more than 25-years younger than his predecessor, inspired Americans to live with greater "viva;" many began taking 50-mile hikes. He also challenged the country to land a man on the moon within a single decade. And although he did not live to see his audacious challenge bear fruit, we did so in less than ten years.

Even LBJ, in his own way, inspired a great segment of American society -- to fight for equality in education, housing and employment. One byproduct of his challenge was the energizing of a young generation who learned the power of protest.

With what has this nation been challenged in recent years? To go shopping? To place trust in leaders who will always "do the right thing" if only we will let them? To accept massive tax cuts for the richest of the rich during a time of war? To aid and abet the cupidity of the upper 1%?

Where oh where are the challenges of yesteryear? And while we're at it, where or where are those who will issue those challenges?

We're not talking about rocket science here. Just plain old-fashioned inspiration. America is in desperate need of a challenge; and I don't mean "victory in Iraq" or "the total eradication of terrorism" -- whatever those illusive terms means.

No I am referring to national challenges, national goals such as:

- A "Manhattan Project" to eliminate America's reliance on non-renewable energy within a single decade. This challenge to become a "green nation" not only will go a long way toward saving the planet; it will also create new industries with new jobs, new revenues and renewed hope.
- A national challenge to not only revamp, but to revolutionize the way we elect our leaders. This might entail a dramatically shortened campaign season of somewhere between three and six months; an end to the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on debasing and attacking one's opponents; total

and mandatory public financing of all campaigns, with draconian consequences for those in violation.

- A challenge to utterly transform our "throw-away" society in which every item we purchase is packaged and carried away in separate non-biodegradable containers. This can be done within a generation.
- A national campaign to rebuild America's dangerously antiquated infrastructure. What we have spent in Iraq to date could easily be used to repair, rebuild and restore every highway, bridge, public school and hospital in America. Not only will this provide jobs; it will restore national pride.

I am not a betting man, so I won't comment on the odds of any of these challenges being issued. I will say, however, that America without a national challenge is not an America worthy of the name.

In choosing our next president, we would do well to cast our votes not for the individual who seems to have an answer or program for every question, or one who is necessarily the most experienced or well-connected. Rather, we could best serve ourselves and our great nation by casting votes for the individual who can best inspire, motivate and challenge.

Indeed, we need the leader who best knows that what this country needs is not a good five-cent cigar, but an energizing national challenge.

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

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**January 31, 2008**

## **Consequentialism and Deontology**

My wife Annie teaches adults from all over the world who come to Ft. Lauderdale for the express purpose of improving their English language skills. Although Annie is not a native English speaker [she's from Argentina], her facility with the "mother tongue" is second-to-none. She is also a dynamite teacher, if I do say so myself.

Once in a blue moon, she will ask me how *I* would explain an expression for people learning English. The other night, while going over a lesson she was preparing, she asked me how to best explain "The ends justify the means." She knew what it meant, but was a bit stuck on how best to get it across to her students. After giving the matter a bit of thought, I suggested:

"You might tell them that *ends* are goals and *means* are the steps or acts we take in order to achieve those goals. Then you might tell them that sometimes, people believe that if the goal is great, any steps one takes to achieve it are OK."

Annie thought that my explanation was just fine. [Never let it be said that my wife isn't a woman of impeccable taste and discrimination!]

On the news that evening, Keith Olbermann reported on Attorney General Michael Mukasey's appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee. The issue at hand was whether or not "waterboarding" is torture and if so, whether or not it is legal. Mukasey, like a vaudevillian of old, did a nifty soft-shoe. Senator Richard Durbin [D-IL] sought to determine if, in Mukasey's view, waterboarding [or indeed any other form of torture] was more acceptable when greater, rather than lesser numbers of lives are at stake:



*"What about circumstances where the information would save lives, many lives?" Senator Durbin asked. "Would you justify it?"*

*"Those circumstances have not been set out," the A.G. answered. "That is not part of the program. We don't know concretely what they are. And we don't know how that would work."*

"You're talking about whether the ends justify the means!" Annie said to the television screen. "What a perfect example."

How right she was.

After Olbermann signed off, we got into a discussion about the moral implications of torture, illegal wiretaps and the like from an "ends justify the means" perspective . . .

Ever since 9/11 the Bush Administration has sought -- and more often than not achieved -- greater authority to abridge civil liberties in the name of National Security. These abridgments include warrantless wiretaps, domestic surveillance, rendition and the use of so-called "passive, non-lethal" forms of interrogation. And whether the abridgment comes via Executive Order or legislative enactment, the argument remains the same: these measures are absolutely necessary if we are to defeat our terrorist enemies.

In other words, the *ends* justify the *means*.

In the world of moral philosophy we find two schools of thought which speak directly to this "ends/means" dichotomy:

**Consequentialism**, a school which holds that the consequences ["ends"] of a particular action or set of actions ["means"] form the basis for any valid moral judgment about the action. For a Consequentialist, the morality of an action is determined by the morality of that action's outcome.

**Deontological Ethics [Deontology]**, an approach to ethics that focuses on the wrongness or rightness of the acts ["means"] themselves, as opposed to the wrongness or rightness of the consequences ["ends"] of

those actions. For a Deontologist, it is all but impossible for an immoral action to result in a moral consequence.

Keeping these definitions in mind, it becomes rather clear that Mukasey's soft-shoe before the Judiciary Committee was an attempt at straddling the line between Consequentialism and Deontology. Sorry Mr. Attorney General: you cannot have it both ways. Actions do not become less immoral [or illegal] when the putative consequence of those actions grows in importance.

As stilted as this may seem, its a truth every parent has taught his or her child at one time or another:

*"Just because Yankel did it doesn't make it right for you to do it. If Yankel were to jump off the roof or break a window on purpose would you follow suit?"*

Although debates and disagreements between Consequentialists and Deontologists may be fascinating on some ideal plane, they are both difficult and vexatious when one is faced with issues of life and death.

Those who argue that America lowers itself to the level of its enemies by using torture to extract information are often labeled "soft on terrorism" or "allies of al-Qaeda." And while this "throwing of red meat to the lions" may be good politics, it totally ignores the seriousness of the charge. I believe it is written in the Gospel of Mark, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his own soul?"

Those who engage in the "ends/means" debate when it comes to techniques of interrogation, warrantless wiretaps, legal protection for those telecommunications companies that facilitate said taps and denying protected "whistleblower" status to those who report abuses, seem to be forgetting that America is not the only country on the planet. One country's "torture" is another's "persuasive technique;" one person's "terrorist" is another's "freedom fighter."

It is terribly difficult -- sometimes impossible -- to know precisely how best to deal with the terrorist enemy. Indeed, we don't even possess a universal definition of what a terrorist or terrorism is.

According to the **State Department**, terrorism is *"premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."*

The **F.B.I.** has its sights set on *"the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."*

According to the **U.S.A. Patriot Act**, terrorism is defined as *"acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the U.S. or of any state."*

For my money, the best definition of terrorism comes from the *Guardian's* **Brian Whitaker**: *"Terrorism is violence committed by those we disapprove of."*

Don't get me wrong: terrorism is a grave, grave international threat. Ridding the world of mass murderers, suicide bombers and *agents provocateurs* is of utmost importance. And yet, if we here in America continue down the path of Consequentialism -- declaring in retrospect that whatever means we use are moral because the end is moral -- we will stand to lose a great deal more than we ever imagined possible: the very soul of our nation.

From where I stand, Deontology just makes a heck of a lot more sense.

The means don't always justify the ends.

# **Beating the Bushes:**

## **All Politics, All The Time**

**February 07, 2008**

### **'Tis the Season to be Loony**

Increasingly, American election seasons have become suffused with the dull gray light of stupidity. Those who are, in theory, capable of *enlightening* the electorate are instead hurling thunderbolts of darkness into the political abyss. Where we could indeed profit from rigorous analysis of each candidates' positions, past accomplishments and future dreams, we are instead led on a guided tour of what might be termed the "dirty underwear drawer of life." Viewed from even a slight distance, the American political process has become far more the creature of *The National Enquirer* than *The New Republic*.

According to pundits, prognosticators and political philosophasters:

- Senator John McCain is a closet liberal.
- Governor Mitt Romney is a true conservative.
- Senator Hillary Clinton is to the left of Emma Goldman.
- Senator Barack Obama is a Muslim plant.
- Governor Mike Huckabee never met a murderer he would not pardon.

'Tis the season to be loony!

For those of us who are engaged, reasonably literate and in need of a daily political "fix," the above "revelations" are, of course, the stuff of derangement. If Senator McCain is a liberal, then I'm a fat, balding blond. If Governor Romney is a true Conservative, then the Dolphins are going to take next year's Superbowl. And if Senator Clinton is -- as has been consistently charged -- "the most liberal member of the United States Senate," then Jimmy Hendrix is alive, well and living with his grandchildren in Beverly Hills.

Just as I am putting a period after the words " . . . in Beverly Hills," word has come across the wires [well, actually the Internet], that former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney is suspending [read: ending] his campaign for the Republican nomination. Speaking before the annual meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, Romney announced that he was getting out of the race, "Because I love America, in this time of war, I feel I have to stand aside for our party and our country."

Had Romney stayed in the race, he would have faced a couple of obstacles, the most daunting of which was reconciling the moderate policies and views he supported while governor of oh-so-liberal Massachusetts, with the vastly more conservative ones he has espoused out on the campaign trail. Add to this the innate [a nice way of saying "incoherent"] distrust many conservative "values voters" have for Mormons, and Romney's flip-flopping on a number of issues -- most notably abortion -- and one can readily understand his decision. Campaign suspension means that Romney's 133 delegates are still tethered to their obligation to vote for him at the this summer's Republican National Convention.

Let's get back to the looniness.

While Romney was yet in the race, conservative talkers like Limbaugh, Hannity, Coulter, Savage and Beck were puffing the "Mittster" as the only true, capital "C" Conservative in the field. McCain? Politically much closer to the likes of Hillary Clinton than to Robert Taft or Ronald Reagan. Mike Huckabee? A dangerous populist lurking in the wings, just waiting to foment class warfare in America.

Listening to all the so-called "Champions of Conservatism" the past few months, I now find myself indulging in a bit of *schadenfreude* and wondering just whom -- or what -- they're going to support in November. If Rush Limbaugh is going to throw his support behind McCain, he will first have to down a five-course feast of crow. Ann Coulter? She will have to go back on her pledge to campaign for Hillary Clinton [I kid you not!] if McCain becomes the nominee. As for Michael Savage . . . well, who can fathom precisely what planet he's going to move to?

Part of their problem involves the very definition of "Conservative." In ages past, conservatives believed that "that government which governs least, governs best." Then too, they believed in balanced budgets, low debt, fiscal integrity and the supremacy of the U.S. Constitution. Somewhere along the line, the term became skewed. Today, "Conservatism" begins with low taxes, deregulation and eavesdropping, wends its way into the bedroom, and emerges as the leading spokesperson for "Fortress America." They seem to have forgotten the folksy apothegm of their newly-anointed paragon Ronald Reagan: "Guv'ment isn't the solution to the problem; gov'ment *is* the problem."

In order for the disciples of this new brand of conservatism [call it "Post Neo-Conservatism"] to support Senator McCain, they will have to don hair shirts, say a couple of thousand Hail Marys, and hope to God that their listeners and followers are brain dead. For as of this morning, John McCain was, in their eyes, a dangerous liberal.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Truth to tell, there *are* still a few moderate Republicans left in America; Maine Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, Minnesota's Norm Coleman and Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter jump to mind. Over on the house side one finds the likes of Connecticut's Christopher Shays, North Carolina's Walter B. Jones, and New Jersey's Christopher H. Smith. And of course, there is always the "Governator," Ah-nold.

As for Senator McCain, his record, with a couple of notable exceptions [campaign finance reform, immigration, stem cell research, drilling in the Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge] is at best, only faintly moderate. In the 109th Congress McCain opposed the White House only 15.6% of the time, and his party less than one time out of five. That would put the Arizona senator in thrall with such other "dangerous liberals" as Ohio's George Voinovich, Alaska's Ted Stevens, New Hampshire's Judd Gregg and Florida's Mel Martinez. A pretty scary lot, no?

So what is it about John McCain that drives Post Neo-Conservatives to distraction? What makes them label him a dangerous liberal? Could it be that he doesn't think the federal government should cut taxes for the

wealthy during a time of war? How about the fact that he believes that the issue of marriage does not belong in the U.S. Constitution? Or maybe because he has actually worked harmoniously with the likes of Ted Kennedy and Russell Feingold?

Your guess is as good as mine. Truth to tell, the more-or-less liberal Americans for Democratic Action [ADA] gave McCain a "15" [out of 100] rating in the last Congress, while the far more conservative National Chamber of Commerce gave him a perfect "100" score. The Family Reserach Council, which promotes marriage and family as the bedrocks of society said McCain agreed with their positions 75% of the time. Compare this to the League of Conservation Voters, which graded McCain at a mere 29%. Are these the grades of a liberal?

It will indeed be fascinating to see what all the Post Neo-Conservatives are going to do from now until November. Will their visceral hatred for Senator Clinton and/or Obama permit them to support Senator McCain -- despite his "liberal" credentials? Or, will Coulter campaign for Clinton, O'Reilly find fewer flaws in Obama, and Hannity stay home?

Only time will tell. But no matter how you look at things, 'Tis indeed the season to be loony.

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*While I have your attention, will everyone please wish my mother, Alice K. Stone, a very happy birthday? On Feb. 8 she turns 84, still wears jeans and boots, and is even more passionately progressive than your humble correspondent!*

## Beating the Bushes:

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February 15, 2008

## The Passing of a Hero

Heroes come in many shapes and sizes. Heroes are also so-anointed for many diverse reasons.

- Some, like Alvin York or Audie Murphy earned humankind's exalted badge on the field of battle.
- Some, like Mother Teresa, Elie Wiesel or Mohandas Gandhi became international icons because they pursued peace.
- Some, like Helen Keller, Ludwig von Beethoven or Franklin Delano Roosevelt were accorded heroic status because they never let physical debility stand in the way of awesome achievement.
- Some heroes are purely personal and subjective: to me, Sir Charles Chaplin is a hero; to others, a deeply flawed wastrel.

And then there is Tom Lantos.

California Congressman Lantos, who died this week at age 80, has been a living, breathing hero for more than 60 years. And yet to tens -- perhaps hundreds -- of millions, his name, his humanity, his heroic deeds are virtually unknown. Lantos' death brings to mind the truth of a statement from the great French poet Alphonse de Lamartine: ***"Sometimes when one person is missing, the whole world seems depopulated."***

A brief thumbnail sketch of Tom Lantos is in order.

Thomas Peter Lantos, the only child of upper-middle class Jewish parents, was born in Budapest in 1928. In 1944, when the Nazis overran Hungary, Lantos was dispatched to Szob, a town 40 miles north of Budapest, where he was put into a forced labor camp. The first time he tried to escape, he was beaten to a pulp. He eventually did escape; his blond hair and blue eyes were a "natural disguise." He then made his way back to Budapest, where he spent the rest of the war living in an



apartment provided by one of history's most selfless heroes: Raoul Wallenberg.

Wallenberg [1912-?] was a Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews. He did this by purchasing 30 apartment buildings, planting a Swedish flag on top of each, and then declaring that as such, were all Swedish territory. Tom Lantos was one of the lucky few.

But wait: there is more.

**Note:** *[What follows comes from the new edition of my book The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill, to be published later this year by Rowman & Littlefield].*

*"Noting Lantos' 'Aryan' coloring, Wallenberg put Lantos to work helping out in an elaborate anti-Nazi underground, delivering a bottle of medicine or loaf of bread to Jews Wallenberg had hiding throughout Budapest. Dressed in a military cadet's uniform, Lantos was able to move around undetected by Nazi authorities. His good deeds, however, were not based strictly on altruism or a desire to help his fellow man, but fatalism. 'I probably wouldn't survive,' Lantos thought at the time. 'I decided I might be of some use. In retrospect, I was doing things I never should have done, because they took more courage than I'm sure I had.'"*

Such is the nature of heroes.

Tom Lantos came to the United States in 1946, married his childhood sweetheart Annette Tillman [a first cousin to Zsa Zsa Gabor], earned a PhD in Economics from Berkeley, and became a professor at San Francisco State. In 1980, he was elected to the House of Representatives from a San Francisco-area district.

One of Lantos' first acts upon entering Congress was to push through a bill making Raoul Wallenberg one of only two people [Winston Churchill being the other] to be declared an honorary citizen of the United States.

Throughout his nearly 28-years in Congress, Tom Lantos was -- understandably -- one of that body's most strident voices for, in the words of Bob Dylan,

*"the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones and worse. And for every hung-up person, in the whole wide universe . . ."*

A champion for the dispossessed of every nation, Lantos was arrested in front of the Sudanese Embassy for protesting the genocide in Darfur. He attacked human rights abuses in China, led the charge for imposing trade sanctions against the regime in Myanmar, and founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. As a staunch enemy of totalitarianism, Lantos was at first a vociferous supporter of the war in Iraq; he later became disillusioned and helped draft a resolution to oppose the president's troop surge.

Tom Lantos was survived by his wife Annette, two daughters, two sons-in-law [one of whom, Richard Swett, served in Congress and was Bill Clinton's Ambassador to Denmark] seventeen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

A courtly, impeccably-tailored old-world gentleman who spoke 5 languages, Lantos was, in the words of Felix Adler the very definition of a hero. For Adler once wrote,

***"The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets for men to see by."***

You sir, kept those torches blazing for four-score years. And for you, we say in the words of the Biblical Jonathan to his dear friend David [1st Sam: 20:18]:

***"V'nifkad'ta, ki yipakayd moshavecha" . . ."***

"You shall be sorely missed, because your seat shall be empty."

*Lech b'Shalom . . .*

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

## **All Politics, All The Time**

**February 21, 2008**

### **The Truth About "It"**

It seems like hardly an hour goes by without my receiving the **"IT"** email from a friend, congregant, student or reader. These emails come in two varieties:

- Those who sincerely want to know if **"IT"** is true, and
- Those who want to clue me in as to **"IT's"** absolute, unvarnished truth

The **"IT"** to which they are all referring is the widely-reported, highly-documented "fact" that Senator Barack Obama is a not-so-closeted anti-Semite who would be an unmitigated disaster for Israel.

Regardless of whether the correspondents are seekers of truth or broadcasters of Bull Durham, their emails all contain the same monotonous litany of "facts":

- Senator Obama belongs to a Chicago church whose pastor, the anti-Semitic Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Jr., is both a friend and vocal supporter of the Jew-hating Louis Farrakhan.
- Senator Obama was quoted as telling the people of Iowa that "Nobody is suffering more than the Palestinian people."
- Senator Obama wrote one "Ali Abunimah" that "Hey, I'm sorry I haven't said more about Palestine right now, but we are in a tough primary race. I'm hoping when things calm down I can be more up front."
- Senator Obama has a dismal voting record on all things Israel.

- Senator Obama is receiving advise on the Middle East from no less an Israel-hater than Zbigniew Brzezinski.

A few questions are in order:

- Where in the world are people getting all these "facts?"
- Why are so many accepting them as the God's honest truth?
- What's the motivation underlying this supposed laundry-list of duplicity?
- Why are so many so willing to accept these "facts" as truth?
- Indeed, is any of it true?

Let us not be left in suspense. The above "facts" -- and these are a mere sampling -- are patently false, bogus, mendacious, and just plain fabricated.

As Mark Twain once noted, "A good lie will have traveled half way around the world while the truth is putting on her boots."

Let's lace up our boots and walk a truthful mile.

Most, if not all the "facts" about Senator Obama reaching our inboxes come from the vitriolic pen of right-wing blogger Ed Lasky. His Blog, "American Thinker" has recently run such anti-Obama, anti-progressive pieces as:

- "John McCain Will Keep the Country Safer"
- "Can Anyone Stop Obama?"
- "Obama's Global Tax" and
- "The Left Wing School Agenda and the Banning of Patriotism."

In preparation for this writing this piece, I chatted up both current and former members of Congress, one of Senator Obama's *real* Middle East policy advisers, and read more than 50 articles. I extend thanks and appreciation to my good friend, former California Congressman Mel Levine [one of the senator's *real* advisers] for providing me with more ammunition than I could possibly use. Among the facts -- yes, verifiable facts -- I uncovered in my research were:

- Speaking at a foreign policy forum in Des Moines on December 18 of last year, Senator Obama said, *"I start with the premise that Israel is a stalwart ally of ours and their security cannot be compromised. I also start with the premise that the status quo is unsustainable and that what would be good for Israel security will be the kind of two-state solution that allows the Palestinians to live and prosper in their own state and allows Israel to maintain the security of its state . . . . I think everyone knows what the basic outlines of an agreement would look like. It would mean that the Palestinians would have to reinterpret the notion of right of return in a way that would preserve Israel as a Jewish state."*
- Contrary to what Lasky reports, Senator Obama has consistently and forcefully denounced both Louis Farrakhan and anti-Semitism.
- The Anti Defamation League [ADL] has found *"No evidence of any Anti-Semitism by Reverend Wright," and that "Reverend Wright did not endorse Farrakhan's views."*
- The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that Senator Obama ". . . *strongly disagrees with any portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that advocates divestment from Israel or expresses anything less than strong support for Israel's security.*" [7/16/07]
- That most of the major Jewish leaders in Chicago -- those who have known him longest and best -- are among his most ardent supporters. These leaders include Congresswoman Jan Shakowsky, Penny Pritzker and Lester Crown.
- That Senator Obama successfully co-sponsored the "Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006, which, among other things, *"Provides assistance for the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority [PA] only during a period for which a presidential certification has determined that no PA ministry, agency or instrumentality is controlled by Hamas unless the Hamas-controlled PA has publicly acknowledged the Jewish state of Israel's right to exist and the Hamas-controlled PA has made demonstrable progress toward purging from its security services individuals with ties to terrorism."*
- After speaking at the national gathering of the American Israel Public Affair Committee [APAC], Obama received the imprimatur of Shmuel Rosner, Washington correspondent of the influential

Israeli paper *Haaretz*: ***"Obama passed any test anyone might have wanted him to pass. So he is pro-Israel. Period."***

- Senator Obama has repeatedly and consistently blamed Palestinian leadership -- and not the Israelis -- for the stalled peace process. The ***New York Times*** noted [3/15/07] that, ***"Mr. Obama blames Hamas, which controls much of the Palestinian government, for the stalled peace talks; he does not blame Israel."***
- On January 9 of this year, the *New York Sun* [hardly a bastion of political liberalism] noted in an editorial that, ***"Mr. Obama's commitment to Israel, as he has articulated it so far in his campaign, is quite moving and a tribute to the broad, bipartisan support that the Jewish state has in America. As a candidate, he has chosen to put himself on the record in terms that Israel's friends in America, at least those not motivated by pure political partisanship, can warmly welcome."***
- That contrary to what Lasky claims, neither George Soros, nor Zbigniew Brzezinski are advising Senator Obama on Middle Eastern issues. According to David Axelrod, the senator's chief strategist, " . . . ***[Brzezinski] is not an Adviser. We do not call him an adviser and he does not call himself an adviser. He is a supporter and endorser of Senator Obama, and they have spoken about the Iraq war once several months ago, a war which they both opposed from the beginning. The only people who call Brzezinski an adviser are the Clinton campaign. . .***"
- In point of verifiable fact, Senator Obama's advisers on Israel and the Middle East are Mel Levine, Congressman Robert Wexler [D-FL], former Clinton Administration Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, former Clinton National Security Adviser Tony Lake, former National Security Council member Dan Shapiro, Denis McDonough, former Foreign Policy Advisor to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, and Eric Lynn, Former Foreign Policy Adviser to former Congressman Peter Deutsch [D-FL]

Now that we have laced up our "boots of truth," perhaps we won't feel so compelled to read the next scurrilous anti-Obama email that comes our way. I cannot -- and will not -- inquire into the motivation of hack writers like Mr. Lasky. I only took one course in Abnormal Psychology. Suffice

it to say that where Lasky is on fraudulent crusade, we are supporting a phenomenal candidate.

As Sir Winston Churchill would have it, *"Truth is incontrovertible, malice may attack it and ignorance may deride it, but, in the end, there it is."*

Much has been made of the fact that in Swahili, the name Barack means "blessing." In Hebrew, the name "Barack" means "lightning." Hopefully, the "Barack" [lightning] of truth will help illumine the "Barack" [blessing] that is the gentleman from Illinois.

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## **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**February 29, 2008**

### **A Race Like Any Other?**

When was the last time a presidential race wasn't called "the most crucial," "critical" or "important" in American history? And when was the last time a presidential election cycle wasn't labeled "the dirtiest" or "sleaziest" of all time? If memory serves, the last time was 2004. And before that was 2000. And before that was undoubtedly 1996.

Heck, probably the only campaign that wasn't considered either "the most crucial" or "the dirtiest" of all time was back in 1788, when George Washington faced only the nominal opposition of John Adams, who was really running for Vice President anyway. [Back then, who ever came in second automatically became V.P.]

Truth to tell, every since then, American presidential races have been filled with charges and counter-charges, tepid half-truths, hi-jinks and the sinking feeling that if one's candidate is defeated, the country will undoubtedly go to hell in a hand basket. In other words, Koheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes was absolutely correct: "There is nothing new under the sun."

In the first truly contested presidential race -- between Adams and Jefferson in 1800 -- the Adams-backed Federalists accused Republican Thomas Jefferson of everything from bilking creditors and business partners to being an abject coward. Adams' operatives called Old Tom a "howling atheist," and claimed that if elected, he would confiscate and burn all the Bibles in America. Even worse, the Adams crowd warned voters that a President Jefferson would burn down all the churches, put an end to the institution of marriage and clap the country's women into bordellos.



Things were even nastier in the 1828 race when President John Quincy Adams ran against Andy Jackson. Adams' acolytes claimed Jackson was an adulterer, a liar, a bigamist, and a murderous drunk who gambled on cockfights. They even went so far as to publish a broadside elucidating Jackson's many brawls and duels, during which, they claimed, he "killed, slashed and clawed various American citizens." Not to be outdone, Jackson partisans struck back, calling Adams an elitist tyrant who lived in a "presidential palace" in "kingly pomp and splendor." They further charged that he traveled on Sunday instead of going to church, and had had premarital sex with wife Louisa.

Not even Abraham Lincoln was spared the brush of derision; he was variously labeled a "fiend," "butcher," and just plain "Ignoramus Abe." Oh yes, he was also accused by his opponent, Stephen Douglas, of being totally without experience. [Lincoln had served but one two-year term in the House a full fourteen years before running for President.]

Then there was the presidential race of 1884, in which James G. Blaine accused Grover Cleveland of having sired an illegitimate child ["Ma, ma, where's Pa"/He's gone to the White House, ha-ha-ha!"] The Cleveland camp responded in kind, tagging their "unworthy" opponent, James G. Blaine, the "continental liar from the state of Maine."

One of my favorites goes back to the 1968 presidential tilt between Nixon and Humphrey. In that race, Dick Tuck, the "clown prince" of political dirty tricks, lined up a couple of dozen obviously pregnant women at a railroad siding, all holding aloft signs which proclaimed "NIXON'S THE ONE!!"

You've got to admit, Presidential campaigns are never boring.

Which brings us to 2008.

Unless conservative Republicans somehow manage to raise the ghost of Ronald Reagan or Robert Taft, John McCain will be their standard bearer. And unless something totally unforeseen -- and completely unpredictable -- occurs, Barack Obama will head the Democratic ticket. [Indeed, in the latter case, the big news wouldn't be Hillary Clinton winning the nomination, but rather Obama losing.]

Will an Obama/McCain race be the dirtiest of all time? And more importantly, is it the most crucial in all American history? The answer to the first is "probably not;" to the second, "it just might be."

We've already seen and heard innumerable sleaze shots firing across the bow of Senator Obama's ship of state. The latest came not from the mouth of Senator McCain, but rather from a surrogate, Cincinnati radio-talk show host Bill Cunningham. In a "throw red meat to the lions" warm up prior to a McCain appearance in the Queen City, Cunningham repeatedly -- and monotonously -- used the "H" word, Senator Obama's middle name.

And of course, there are all those charges about Obama being a Muslim sleeper that just won't go away. For his part, Senator Obama has remained remarkably diplomatic and dignified. The man seems rather unflappable. When Senator McCain tried to take the Illinois senator "to school" over his comment about al-Qaeda in Iraq, Obama responded not with irritation, but with irony. And have you noticed that whenever Senator Obama is about to speak about his Republican rival, he prefaces his remarks with acknowledgment and veneration for McCain's war record?

Good stuff.

But what about the importance of the 2008 race? Is it the "most crucial," the "most important" in a long, long time? As we noted above, it just might be. Throughout American history, certain elections have presented watershed moments; distinct opportunities to counter an increasingly stale past with a progressive vision of the future. This has been especially true when either:

1. The two major candidates represent different generations, or
2. One candidate is decidedly younger than the man he is seeking to replace. A couple of facts:

\* Of the 56 presidential campaigns between 1788 and 2008, the younger candidate has won 37.5% of the time.

\* In five races between 1788 and 2004, one candidate was old enough to be the other's father.

\* In three of those five, the "son" defeated the "father." [Pierce v. Scott in 1852, Clinton v. Bush in 1992, and Clinton v. Dole in 1996.]

The first time two candidates representing different generations squared off was in 1836. In that race, Martin Van Buren faced the much-older William Henry Harrison. Van Buren won, thereby becoming the nation's first post-colonial born president.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy became the first president who was born in the 20th century. Kennedy's youth, charm and "viga" were bipolar opposites of the avuncular Dwight Eisenhower, the man he would replace. Moreover, being nearly 30 years younger [27, to be precise] than Ike, Kennedy attracted the votes of a generation just entering the political process.

John McCain is 27 years older than Barack Obama. Never before has one candidate been so much older than his opponent. [The next closest would be Buchanan v. Fremont in 1856; the victorious Buchanan was 22 years older than Fremont.] Far more important than this statistical anomaly however, is the fact that Senator Obama represents -- and is giving voice to -- a potentially new, previously untapped slice of the American electorate. He has managed to raise more money -- and from more of the so-called "little people" -- than any candidate in history. And while many belittle his message of hope, calling it "full of sound and fury signifying nothing," he has managed to touch a yearning nerve. For countless millions, "the politics of hope" trounces the politics of fear.

Over the past five-plus years, America has become mired in an endless war. We are in intractable debt. Our civil liberties are being stripped away in the name of security. America's reputation in the community of nations is about as low as the value of the dollar. Both home foreclosures and the price of gas are at an all-time high. Our infrastructure is crumbling. Our borders are porous. The Lady With the Lamp has seen her torch go out. The national treasury has become the personal vault of the "haves" and "have mores." The president has become a caricature. We are all but rudderless.

And yet, despite all of the above, the party of John McCain still argues about cutting taxes codifying marriage, and crediting creationism. These

so-called "wedge issues" -- and a host of others -- are the politics of America's *ancien regime*.

Weigh all this against the hopefulness of the Obama campaign. It represents a generational change. It is a message that reaching out to one's adversaries -- whether on Capitol Hill or abroad -- is worth a try. It is a call to our "higher angels" It can be a new beginning.

Indeed, it is a race *unlike* any other.

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

March 05, 2008

## The Price of Victory

Anyone who lived through -- or has studied -- World War II is familiar with the cartoons of Bill Mauldin. For those too young to know [or perhaps too old to remember] Mauldin [1921-2003] was *the* ace cartoonist of that conflict. A "dogface" with the 45th Infantry Division, Mauldin's best-known creations were two cartoon characters, "Willie and Joe," who



became synonymous with the average American G.I. -- part warrior, part pack animal, always weary, always begrimed. For soldiers on the front lines and the folks back home, Willie and Joe provided a running commentary on the war in Europe.

I well remember spending countless hours pouring over Mauldin's cartoons in a book entitled *Up Front*, which had a place of honor on my parents' bookshelf. One cartoon that has always stayed with me was, I believe, the last one Mauldin published in *Stars and Stripes*: Willie and Joe are hunkered down in a foxhole. Off in the distance are the remains of a once great metropolis, now bombed to smithereens. Willie stares blankly at Joe and says, "Well, at least we won!"



This particular cartoon came to mind last night while I was watching the election returns with a bunch of local politicians. It stayed with me all day as further statistics and "post-game" commentary become available. Only one certainty emerged from yesterday's primaries: Senator McCain is the new face of the Republican Party. Already, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee has officially dropped out of the race; already President Bush has given

Senator McCain his Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." None of these should come as surprises.

Now that McCain has been enthroned, the press will turn virtually all its attention to the ongoing war of words and wits between Senators Clinton and Obama. This is as things should be; after all, there's still a long, long way to go until either Clinton or Obama grabs the brass ring. The waters are still murky and roiled.

Yesterday's primary races in Rhode Island, Ohio, Texas and Vermont ["ROTV" for short] undoubtedly gave Hillary Clinton both the bragging rights and the "big mo," but still kept Barack Obama ahead in the hunt for delegates. As of 5:00 p.m. today, March 5, Obama appears to have 1,561 committed delegates to Clinton's 1,461. In the hunt for "Super Delegates," [there are about 800 of them], Clinton leads Obama 241-202. From a statistical point of view, it would take nothing short of an act of God for either candidate to capture the nomination before this summer's convention in Denver.

Facts and statistics however, can only take one so far. They cannot and do not tell us what's going to happen tomorrow. Nonetheless, several subjective observations do come to mind:

- From now until Denver, Senators Clinton and Obama should be aiming the majority of arrows in their respective political quivers not at each other, but at Senator McCain.
- Neither of these worthy candidates should give the Republicans further ammunition: Clinton's "3:00 a.m." television spot is just perfect for Senator McCain to use against Senator Obama. Indeed, all he has to do is add his own "I am John McCain, and I approve this message" voice-over to Clinton's ad. Heaven knows, he'll save a ton of money in production costs!
- Senator Clinton should stop making comments like: *"I have a lifetime of experience that I will bring to the White House. Senator McCain has a lifetime of experience to [bring to] the White House. And Senator Obama has a speech he gave in 2002."* This kind of remark is fodder McCain's "Straight Talk Express." One can imagine the Republicans using that clip over and over in the general election [should Senator Obama indeed be the nominee]. The

obvious implication would be, "You see, even Hillary Clinton agrees that John McCain is more experienced and would make a better president than Barack Obama!"

- Moreover, should Barack Obama to become the Dem's nominee, of what value will a Clinton endorsement be? Can she take back her "John McCain has a lifetime of experience, Barack Obama has a speech" comment? Indeed, will observations like this -- and "Senator Obama is a Christian . . . so far as I know" -- fracture the party?
- Those Super Delegates who are as yet uncommitted would do well to cast their votes for whichever candidate has the plurality going into Denver. Were they to overturn the will of the nation's primary voters, it could easily bring Republican charges of racism, sexism or political shenanigans taking place in [non] smoke-filled back rooms.
- There are unconfirmed reports that many Texas Republicans crossed over the partisan Rubicon and voted for Senator Clinton, believing that she would be far easier to defeat come fall than Senator Obama. Whether or not this is true, it brings up a serious issue: which candidate stands the best chance of defeating McCain in November?
- Many are beginning to ask if Senator Obama's disdain for "going negative" is a political character flaw; a sort of John Kerry *redux*. From my perspective, this "flaw" is one of the things that make Senator Obama absolutely unique; he possesses a dignity of character that is *sui generis* in this era of "take no prisoners" politics. Those people whose knowledge of the campaigns and candidates is limited to "dirty underwear" headlines likely wouldn't be voting for Obama anyway. I may be wrong, but I believe that people are fed up with campaigns that overflow with sewage.

But what to Bill Mauldin, Willie and Joe and "At least we won!" have to do with all of the above?

Only this: If candidates will do anything, say anything -- indeed, charge anything -- in order to win the nomination, what, in the end of days will

they have won? A fractured party? An albatross that will weigh them down from Denver to November? Four more years of corporate welfare and pandering to the "haves and have mores?"

Shortly after Mauldin's final cartoon appeared in *Stars and Stripes*, America instituted the Marshall Plan --the reconstruction of war-ravaged Europe. It turned out to be one of America's -- indeed history's -- most godly, dignified deeds.

Sorry to say, but there is no Marshall Plan for a war-ravaged party.

There is only Mauldin's maudlin caption.

March 05, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



## Beating the Bushes:

### All Politics, All The Time

March 12, 2008

### "If It Bleeds, It Leads"

Have no fear: this will *not* be another article on the rise and fall of [as of 7 1/2 minutes ago] former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer. There have already been far too many. I for one will simply *not* rehash all the other high flying politicians who have suddenly and inextricably crash-landed on the rocky tor of ignominy.

As much as I may wish, I will dutifully refrain from tossing around the names of such disgraced public officials as Wilber Mills, Neil Goldsmith, Bob Packwood, Robert Bauman, Robert Leggett, Wayne Hayes, Randy "Duke" Cunningham, Gary Condit, Larry Craig, Gary Hart, Dan Crane, Buz Lukens, Fred Richmond, Barney Frank, John Doolittle, Mark Foley or David Vitter.

As tempting as it may be, I simply will *not* draw comparisons between how some paragons of virtue like Republican Senators Larry ["I've been a bad, bad boy"] Craig and David ["I asked for and received forgiveness from God and my wife"] Vitter skated, while others like Democrats Jim McGreevey and Tony Coelho took the political pipe.

I will of course conquer the urge to use that Nietzsche quote [*"Wer mit Ungerheruern kämpft. . ."*] about "He who fights with monsters should to it that he himself does not become a monster."

No, I won't do any of these; I won't go there. For after all, as I wrote about 200 words back, this will *not* be another piece on the rise and fall of Eliot Spitzer.

Well, not exactly . . .

What this *is*, is rumination -- call it meditation or contemplation -- on what *does* and *does not* get our collective juices flowing; on which scandals capture our breathless attention and which put us into narcoleptic stupor. It is

about which sins get the screaming headlines, and which the code of silence.

Indeed, which?

In a new book entitled *Free Lunch*, subtitled *How the Wealthiest Americans Enrich Themselves at Government Expense [and Stick You With the Bill]* New York Times reporter David Cay Johnston hit the nail on the head in writing [p. 236]: **"Today's politician is far more likely to get attention for personal acts that belie a public image of a virtuous life than for promising to protect voter's purses while working stealthily to pick them."**

How -- and why and when -- did we as a nation, a people, get to the point where what are essentially private peccadilloes came to trump issues of public corruption ninety-nine times out of a hundred? Pretty strange, no? Consider the following:

- Far more people have an opinion about the glaring stupidity of Eliot Spitzer than know -- or seemingly care -- about how Congress and the White House stuck American taxpayers with the so-called "Medicare Prescription Drug Plan." This plan -- which they swore on a stack of Bibles would cost no more than \$400 billion over 10 years -- turns out to cost some \$720 billion. That's 80% more than originally advertised.
- A lot of Americans are both angrier and more knowledgeable about *l'affaire Clinton/Lewinsky* than they are about the ongoing boondoggle at the Department of Defense. Who knows or cares about the fact that our troops in Iraq are essentially forbidden to do their own laundry? That instead, it has been jobbed out to a private concern that charges more than \$50 a load?
- There has been far more airtime -- and public attention -- devoted to Congressional hearings on the use of steroids by pitcher Rodger Clemens than to the looming Constitutional clash between Congress and the White House over former White House Counsel Harriet Miers and former Chief of Staff Andy Card. Indeed, it is likely that for every person who can successfully identify both Miers and Card, there are ten million who can give line and verse on "Roger Rocket."

- During this, our seemingly endless presidential election season, the media -- and thus we, the public -- have shown far more interest in such "hot button" issues as whether Senator Clinton's tears are real or Senator Obama once sold drugs, than truly vital issues like healthcare, the economy, the war, or the shifting of so much of this nation's wealth to the top .1% of all wage earners.

Let's face it; the old strategy of "Bread and Circuses" did not die out with the fall of the Roman Empire. *[n.b. The term 'bread and circuses' refers to the method that the ruling Roman elite used to maintain their power and control over the people. Through this method, they kept their "sheep" fat and happy, even as they "fleeced" them.]*

America is likely the most acquisitive, wealth-enchained society in the history of the planet. Every day, we are fed a steady diet of the lifestyles, possessions and foibles of the rich and famous. Their cars, jewels, salaries and romances are staring us in the face on countless cable stations and newsstands from Bangor to San Diego. The media is only too happy to provide the "bread and circuses" via stories of venality, crime, murder, mayhem and debauchery. It keeps us riveted; it keeps us from paying attention to what is truly going on. Where the Romans kept their sheep from recognizing how badly they were being fleeced, our modern corporate media has likewise managed to keep our minds diverted from the fleecing we are getting.

The media has a slogan for this: "If it bleeds, it leads."

I for one think Eliot Spitzer is both brilliant and a horse's hind end. He gives new meaning to the term "hubris." What he has done to his family, himself and the people of New York is both tragic and as foul as a flatulent water buffalo. But it also tells us a great deal about who we are as a nation. It says that we are far more engaged in the moral failings of mortal beings than in the health, sustainability and future of our own country.

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March 12, 2008 in [The American Scene . . .](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**March 21, 2008**

### **"THE SPEECH"**

One of humankind's oldest and best-known tales deals with a bunch of blind men [or men "in the dark"] who come upon an elephant. [*N.B. from here on out, do remember that we are referring to a magnificent beast, and not the symbol of the Republican Party!*]

Each man touches the enormous pachyderm in order to determine what it is like. When finished, they compare notes. They discover that they are in complete disagreement. In the Jainist version of the story, the man who feels the elephant's leg declares that the beast is like a pillar; the one feeling its tail that its like a rope . . . and so on.

Although divergent tales can be found in -- among others -- the Jain, Buddhist and Sufi-Hindu traditions, the moral remains absolutely constant: reality may be viewed differently depending on one's perspective. Back in the mid-19th century, American poet John Godfrey Saxe penned:

*It was six men of Indostan to learning much inclined,*

*Who went to see the elephant [though all of them were blind.]*

*That each by observation, might satisfy his mind. . .*

The poem goes on through innumerable stanzas until at last Saxe reaches the moral:

*So oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,*

*Rail on in utter ignorance, of what each other I mean.*

*And prate about an Elephant not one of them has seen!*

How true; how utterly true.

This tale has been darting in and out of consciousness the past few days as I mull over the various responses to Senator Barack Obama's historic speech about the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and racism in America.

Responses ran the gamut from "flat out brilliant," "epochal" and "the best we're likely to hear for a long, long time," to "disquieting," "grating," and "an insult to America." The *New York Times* editorialist breathlessly compared Senator Obama's speech to inaugural addresses of Lincoln and FDR; the *Washington Post* rhapsodized that Obama's speech was " . . . a compelling answer both to the challenge presented by his pastor's comments and to the growing role of race in the presidential election."

On "the elephant's other side," one finds former Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell -- himself an African American -- banging the klaxon of utter revulsion: "Here is a guy who basically said that, while he was in Reverend Wright's church, he embraces Louis Farrakhan." Then there are all the ditto-heads of the blogosphere weighing in with such "thoughtful" comments as: "A sorry attempt to bail his own ass out of the fire speech;" "Historic introduction of the left wing class warfare doctrine into mainstream presidential politics;" and perhaps most succinctly, just plain "barf!"

Let's take off the blinders and examine our "elephant" in the bright light of reality.

As one who watched, listened and read Senator Obama's oration through the eyes, ears and experience of a long-time speech writer and speech-giver, I came away with one over-arching response: "This man is the real deal." Moreover, as a long time pulpit rabbi, I found myself wishing that I had had a congregant such as he: one who is intelligent enough to vehemently and diplomatically disagree with his pastor on point, but self confident enough not to join the throng calling for the preacher's beheading or dismemberment. '

The senator's explanation of the difference between his and the Reverend Wright's generation was both masterfully down-to-earth and meaningfully didactic. Jeremiah Wright was born a full 23 years *before* passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; Barack Obama a mere 36 months. When Wright was born in 1941, there was a single African American in Congress -- Illinois's Arthur Mitchell. By the time he was 20 there were four. By comparison, by the time Barack Obama turned 20 in 1981, there were 18. Additionally, two of the eighteen -- California's Julian Dixon and New York's Charles Rangel -- were committee chairs.

Senator Obama's point is clear: although he disagrees with many, if not most, of the Reverend Wright's more outrageous statements and points of view, he does, nonetheless, understand how he came to hold these opinions. Compare a '60s-era student at Berkeley, Columbia or Kent State with one from 20 years later. There are differences galore in politics, socialization, and overall world view; where a '60s-era student may have been part of SDS or the Student Mobilization Against the War, his or her 80s-era counterpart was likely in a fraternity, sorority, or -- dare we say -- ROTC.

Far more importantly, Senator Obama showed himself to be a thoughtful, articulate progressive-minded candidate who is unafraid to speak out on one of America's sorest -- and most historically tragic -- issues: racism. The courage and eloquence he showed in addressing America's longstanding "monster in the closet" was something befitting a future president. Indeed, it was both essential and utterly refreshing.

There have always been two major threads twisting through American history; call them the "communitarian" and the "individualistic." The first, embodied by the likes of Jefferson and Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and the Kennedys, have understood and counseled that this nation's progress depends on a collective "we're-all-in-this-together" attitude. In an earlier generation, the "communitarian" thread was perhaps best expressed by JFK when he said "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

In opposition to this has been the "individualistic" thread; the one best embodied by the Adamses and Tafts, by Nixon and to a lesser extent by Reagan. This attitude understands and fosters an America that is the

product of unbridled, untrammelled, unregulated individual effort. It is the Horatio Alger myth writ large; the "Anyone-with-the-will-and-energy can-make-it-in-America" point of view.

This week, Senator Barack Obama declared himself to be firmly, foursquarely and articulately, a devotee of the communitarian school of thought and action. As such, he, like Kennedy before him, has laid down a communal challenge to America. It is the challenge of FDR -- that we not fear the present, but work together as a nation so that the weakest and the least among us can find dignity and hope in the future. It is a call to our higher angels; a call that requires us to collectively roll up our sleeves and together, work for a better society, a better world.

Yes, there are those who will continue to chip away and denigrate everything Senator Obama -- or his wife Michelle -- does, says or thinks. But we cannot -- indeed must not -- be disheartened. Senator Obama is striving to provide Americans with a road map to the future. I for one hope he succeeds.

For he is one of the few who has seen that elephant with unblinded eyes, and has a pretty good idea of just how majestic that powerful creature truly is.

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March 21, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

**March 12, 2008**

# **Beating the Bushes:**

## **All Politics, All The Time**

**March 28, 2008**

### **Dear Mel: Its That Time Again!**

Dear Mel:

I won't begin with the usual "hope all is well with you and the family," because I *know* how you're doing.

You're excited. You're totally psyched. You're reasonably optimistic.

Baseball season is about to begin!

As one die-hard Dodger fan to another [we likely rank in the top ten], I know you're counting the hours until that first pitch. Then it all begins anew: fastballs, double plays, suicide squeeze bunts; all that goes into what Tommy Lasorda calls "bleeding Dodger Blue."

Already I can hear Vince Scully's " . . . so pull up a chair and spend some time with us." You know something Mel? Its quite likely that next to my father, the one male voice I've heard the most in my life is Vinnie's. Remember his old sidekick Jerry Doggett? Remember that first season back in 1958?

My god, that was half a century ago!

Do you remember the opening day lineup for that first game against the Giants at old Seals Stadium?

Gino Cimoli            cf

Pee Wee Reese      ss

Duke Snider          lf



Gil Hodges	1b
Charlie Neal	2b
Dick Gray	3b
Carl Furillo	rf
Rube Walker	c
Don Drysdale	p

I'm sure you recall that the Dodgers lost that opener 8-0; that Jim Spencer hit that first homerun off of Drysdale; that Willie Mays went two-for-five with two rbi. And of course you remember that they came back the next day and destroyed the Giants 13-1 behind the masterful 5-hit performance of Johnny Podres. As I recall, Dick Gray hit the first L.A. Dodger homerun off the long-forgotten Ramon Monzant, who had a career record of 16-21.

The first game I attended with my Dad was on Sunday, July 13 versus the Cincinnati Redlegs [as they were called back then.] We had pretty good seats just behind that left field screen that Wally Moon would make famous with his "Moon Shots." I remember like it was yesterday; Frank Robinson [Frank Robinson!] was playing left that day, and my father told me that someday he would make the Hall of Fame. We won that day 3-0 behind the 3-hit, 10-strike out performance of Stan Williams. Furillo and Neal both homered. Heck, I even remember the umpires that day: Ken Burkhardt, Dusty Boggess, Ed Sudol and Tom Gorman.

That first Dodger team, which went 71-83, had a bunch of relative unknowns named Koufax, Fairly, Larker, Lillis, Bilko, the Sherry brothers [all hail Fairfax High!], Pignatano and Howard. Oh how they scrapped; oh how they lost! But of course, the next season they became the first team to go from worst-to-first when they beat the Chicago White Sox four games to two in the World Series.

Those were the days!

You know Mel, back then we didn't care -- let alone know -- how much players made. About the only thing I knew on any personal level was that Don Drysdale had a "restaurant" not too far from our home. [Actually, it turned out to be a bar -- I was really upset to think that "Big-D" might be a drinker.] Complete games were the norm; there wasn't any official statistic called "saves;" most players had off-season jobs.

Today, it is almost impossible to tell the difference between the sports and business sections of the newspaper. During the off-season, when finding articles on baseball is about as difficult as selling snow boots to the Saudis, all we read are stories about the tens -- even hundreds -- of millions the players are getting; about who's being accused of taking what they euphemistically call "performance enhancing drugs;" and about who's being arrested for DUI, assault or carrying a concealed weapon. It used to be that whenever the word "battery" was used in a baseball-related story it meant the pitcher-and-catcher, not something from the police blotter.

Fifteen seasons ago, I attended the Opening Day luncheon for the Florida Marlins; they had asked me to give the invocation. I got to sit at a table with then-owner Wayne Huizenga, then-manager Rene Lachemann and broadcasters Joe Angel and Dave O'Brien. After lunch [amazingly, Mr. Huizenga provided me with kosher food!], I got to go around the room and shake hands and chat with all the players . . . Benito Santiago, Orestes Destrade, Jeff Conine, Gary Sheffield and Walter Weiss. When I got to Charlie Hough, we chatted a bit about his days with the Dodgers, and then I blurted out, "Charlie, you've just got to continue pitching for as long as you can!"

"Any particular reason," the knuckle-baller asked.

"Well yeah," I said sheepishly. "You see, once you retire, there won't be anyone older than me playing major league baseball." Eyeing my gray hair and white beard, he said, "Thanks a heap rabbi! You make me feel soooo young." We both cracked up.

And yet, beneath the shared laughter, there was a bit of serious truth; the fact that "America's Pastime" was passing me by. Heck, back in 1958, the "youngsters" were born in the late 1930s; today those same guys are in their late-60s, early-70s. Think of it: Duke Snider is 82; Sandy is past 70!

Today's rosters are filled with players who are younger than my favorite tie. Where oh where has the time gone?

And yet Mel, whenever Opening Day is upon us, the old juices start to flow, the little kid in both of us begins to reawaken. I know my mom, [whose first baseball hero was Cubs Catcher-Manager Gabby Hartnett] is beginning to remember her old days sneaking into Wrigley Field wearing her older sister's dresses so she could get in on "Ladies Day." April makes kids of us all.

So, let's forget about Barry Bonds, Roger Clemens, Alex Rodriguez and the whole steroid mess; let's not pay attention to who's making how much. Instead, let's get back to what makes America's Pastime so wonderful: balls and strikes, towering homeruns. Gravity-defying curves and the seventh inning stretch.

It's time to be boys again.

With all good wishes and the hope of seeing you at Dodger Stadium in late October,

Kurt

Play ball!

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**April 03, 2008**

## **You Say You Want a Revolution?**

These are the days that give pessimists the courage to proclaim, "You see? We are right; the world *is* going to hell in a hand basket!" And tho I'm far from being a member of this depressive fraternity, I cannot in all good conscience completely dismiss their claim. Things truly *have* gotten out of hand. Whether it be:

- Our war-without-end in Iraq,
- The use of fear as a political tool,
- Assaults on civil liberties,
- The sub-prime debacle and its attendant capital "R" Recession,
- Ever-increasing gas prices,
- Ever decreasing wages,
- The alarming rise in the medically uninsured or
- The unconscionable widening of the gap between the haves and have-nots,

There is sure a lot to feel despairing, depressed, or just plain downhearted about.

Where do we go, what do we have to do in order to put things right?

- Elect a president who is both literate and a Democrat?
- Vote in a veto-proof Congress?
- Put a halt to all the deregulation that's made fraud, thievery, and willful mismanagement the newest and greatest sacrament for the power gods of Wall Street?
- Find a crystal ball to rub?

How's about a revolution?

"How's that?" you ask. "A revolution? You mean like *1776, Les Miserables* or *Ten Days That Shook the World*?"

No, no, a thousand times no. I'm *not* in any way, shape or form urging that we dump tea into Boston Harbor, storm the Bastille or launch an assault on the Winter Palace. No, none of those would work. As the great American wit Ambrose Bierce once noted, "In politics, revolution is an abrupt change in the form of *mis*government."

The only weapons we will need for *this* revolution are words, votes, and a dollar or three.

What in the name of T. Jefferson am I talking about?

Think about it. What is at the root of so many of this nation's problems? Its not so much *who's* in charge or which party they represent, as *how* they get put in charge and *whom* they are representing. After thinking the matter through pretty thoroughly, I've concluded that the one revolutionary change that might -- just might -- put the pessimists out of business is . . .

### CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM!!

Before you think I've gone off my rocker, permit me to share a couple of statistics.

In 2006, Senator Hillary Clinton spent a grand total of \$39,833,526 to win reelection. A six-year term consists of 2,190 days [6 years X 365 days]. That means that for each of those 2,190 days, Senator Clinton had



to raise an *average* of \$18,188.22 a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for six years. OK, lets give her the benefit of the doubt and say she took weekends off. That would reduce her fund-raising days to 1,560. On this "easier" schedule she would have had to raise \$25,534.31 a day, five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for six

years. And what did she get for her nearly \$40,000,000.00? Why 3,008,428 votes, which works out to \$11.42 per vote! One good thing to report is that a mere 4% of Senator Clinton's "take" came from PACs.

Senator Obama, by comparison raised \$15,098,157.00 for which he received precisely 3,597,456 votes -- a paltry \$4.04 a vote.

On the House side, let's take two representatives at random. The first is Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida's 20th District. Despite not having had a challenger in her last election, Rep. Wasserman Schultz raised \$1,036,924.00, which works out to \$1,994.10 per day five days a week, fifty-two weeks a year for two years.

The second representative is Vern Buchanan of Florida's 13th District. Buchanan, who was running for an open seat raised an astounding \$8,123,186.00 -- of which nearly \$5.5 million came out of his own



pocket. Buchanan, who beat his Democratic opponent Christine Jennings by a mere 369 votes [out of more than 238,000 cast], wound up spending the princely sum of \$229.44 for each vote he received.

Is it any wonder that our political system is in the pits?

A huge percentage of all the money donated to political campaigns comes from the very well heeled. And believe me, they don't just make their contributions out of a sense of civic duty. If you were to ask them what they expect in return, the answer would generally be "access." By this they mean the ability to have their voice, their point of view, their personal concerns on matters of policy, heard.

It is because of the political money pit that certain firms get contracts while others do not. Is it any wonder that in the current sub-prime meltdown, the only ones being protected are the very folks who pushed the sub-prime loans in the first place? After all, it's the merchant bankers and hedge-fund managers who make the contributions, not the little fellow hoping against hope to finally purchase a home.

Political money has a lot to do with why America is the only industrialized country without National Health Insurance. The health care industry donates tens of millions of dollars to candidates who will do their darnedest to keep the profits rolling in.

And to be sure, all the cash that the oil industry donates insures higher prices at the pump, a laissez-faire attitude toward global warming, and a steady flow of profits.

There are those who argue that to put limits or strictures on political money is tantamount to gutting the First Amendment. "Money is speech," the magnates claim. And in a sense they are correct. It's what's known as "Gold's Law." He [or she] who has the gold, makes the law.

If our revolution is to work, if our elected officials are ever going to become attentive to little ol' us, three doable changes will have to be made and enforced:

1. Presidential and Congressional elections will be funded -- ONLY funded -- by the public via a \$3.00 tax appended to every federal return.
2. In order to qualify for federal dollars, candidates will be required to file petitions with qualified signatures, the number to be worked out by a formula that varies by state and/or district.
3. No one leaving elected or executive-appointed posts will be permitted to engage in any form of lobbying for a minimum of two years, dating from their last day in their former position.

This "revolution" will likely cost somewhere between \$2.5 and \$5 billion a year, which at first gasp, seems rather pricey. However, when one takes into account the *hundreds* of billions being doled out in the form of deregulation, tax cuts, tax rebates and no-bid contracts to those who are greasing the political pole, even the \$5.0 billion price tag is mere chump change.

Classically, the optimist is defined as one who sees the glass being half-full, the pessimist half-empty. Me, I'm a realist: so long as there's *something* in the glass, it's OK.

The time has come that we the people take back our country from those who use the government as their personal feeding trough.

This is one revolution that can change the course of American history.

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April 03, 2008 in [Stand Up and Be Counted](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

April 10, 2008

## "Up North" in South Florida

Politically speaking, Florida is a very strange place; the further south one travels the more northern it becomes. Broward and Palm Beach are, for my money, the two sanest counties in the state. Ofttimes we act and vote as if we were NYC's sixth borough. Our congressional delegation is made up of three stalwart liberals: Robert Wexler, Ron Klein and Debbie Wasserman Schultz. All three are young, bright and rising stars in the Democratic firmament.

However, once one starts trekking up north or just west of Broward and Palm Beach Counties, something strange begins to happen; one gets the eerie feeling that they've gone from Brooklyn to Biloxi. North Florida is hardcore Dixie: pickups with gun racks, Confederate flags and Republican bumper stickers galore. Heck, our state song is still *Old Folks at Home* [that's *Way Down Upon the Swanee River* to the uninitiated].

In *North* Florida, *Crackers* are those folks whose kin have been here forever -- long, long before the days of air conditioning, mosquito repellent, antiperspirants, or Bloomingdales. In *South* Florida, *crackers* are something one serves up with a slice of Stilton and a glass of aged tawny port. Although Florida is a single state in point of law, it is antipodean in point of fact.

As someone who has been "staying" -- I refuse to say "living" -- in South Florida for more than a quarter century, I'm here to tell you that people give up an awful lot just to escape the snows of winter or income taxes of April -- of which we have neither. Down here in Florida what we do have are dangerously underfunded schools, an incomprehensible tax code, three of the most miserable excuses for professional sports teams, a vast army of scam artists [they don't call it Ft. *Frauderdale* for nothing] and the constant threat of hurricanes. I still don't understand why those who raise ostriches don't pay tax on the food they purchase for their

critters, but farmers do for the stuff they feed their cows. Or why there is no tax on bottled water and yogurt, but there is on carbonated drinks. There is even talk about going to a sales-tax only system -- certainly the most regressive form of taxation known to man or beast.

So why do we stay? Beats me.

Recently, Florida voters put their stamp of approval on a property tax cut that will result in an annual average household saving of \$240.00. What we're all going to be spending that \$240.00 on is a good question. A week's groceries? Most of a month's utility bill? Four tickets to see the Dolphins lose? Those of us who voted against this proposal recognized that its passage would push the Sunshine State into an even deeper fiscal hole.

Already, we are seeing clear-cut evidence of just what we hath wrought. Just yesterday, the Florida Senate, by a party line vote of 26-12, approved a \$65.9 billion budget that makes dramatic cuts in monies allocated for prisons, child abuse investigations, public schools and health programs for the poor and elderly. At the same time, the Republican-controlled body resoundingly rejected Democratic proposals to close corporate tax loopholes. Among the Senate's proposed cuts are 1,800 correctional officers, 660 probation officers and more than 70 child abuse investigators. Public school funding will drop by \$115.90 per student.

Here in Broward County, the school board is madly seeking places to cut spending. How about teachers, books and extracurricular activities? At Florida Atlantic University where I teach, we're staring at millions of dollars in lost appropriations from the state. Perhaps they'll raise tuition fees; they certainly have frozen salaries. What little we may be saving in property taxes will likely be more than overbalanced by raises in city and county fees. Talk about a lose-lose situation!

So what are the hot issues up in the state capitol these days?

Why Evolution vs. Creation Science and Intelligent Design, and the legal right to take a weapon to work. That's what!

Just yesterday -- April, 8, 2008 -- the Senate Judiciary Committee, by a 7-3 vote, approved the "Evolution Academic Freedom Act." It now goes on to the full chamber for consideration. According to this bill, Florida teachers would be granted the right to "freely mention religious theories about the origin of humankind -- including creationism and intelligent design -- along with evolution without fearing retribution."

According to the bill's prime sponsor Senator Ronda Storms [R-Valrico - about 250 miles NE of our home] she filed the bill after hearing cases of students and teachers who felt "muzzled" and "unable to discuss alternate theories on the origin of life in the classroom." Senator Storms claimed to have direct personal knowledge of teachers who have "suffered retribution from school authorities," and students who have been the target of "denigrating comments" from other teachers." Predictably, the three votes against the bill came from Senators Deutsch, Geller and Ring, who represent districts in Broward and Palm Beach Counties.

Storm's bill was filed after the state Board of Education, by a one-vote margin, approved changes to the state science standards requiring the teaching of the "scientific theory of evolution." The state board went so far as to enter the late 19th century by finally, finally admitting that evolution is "a fundamental concept underlying all biology." In voting against the measure in committee, Senator Steve Geller, the Senate's Democratic Leader, stated the obvious: "I believe the purpose of this bill is to let people bring their religious beliefs into school."

Senator Storm's contention that both students and teachers have suffered reprisals and discrimination as a result of their beliefs is the stuff of pure fiction. The Florida Department of Education reports that "there has never been a case in Florida where a public school teacher has claimed discrimination based on their science teaching."

Getting hot under the collar? Well, as the old TV tag line goes, "But wait, there's more!"

On the same day the Judiciary Committee gave their thumbs-up to the "Let's Drown Darwin Act," the full Senate handed an overwhelming victory to the National Rifle Association. Again voting along party lines, the full senate passed a measure allowing some half-million Floridians

with concealed weapons permits to carry their guns to work -- so long as they are locked up in their cars. The vote capped a nearly three-year effort by the NRA to get the measure enacted.

That's just great. Imagine a worker getting ticked off at the boss. All he/she has to do is go out to the parking lot, get that Mauser out of the trunk, go back inside and start blasting away. Our governor, Charlie "The Tan Man" Christ announced that he will have "no problem" signing the bill into law: "The Second Amendment is very important . . . I understand there are competing interests . . . but people being protected is most important to me."

Oy!

So why, when the Sunshine State is facing so many fiscal difficulties, when schools, prisons and the poor are getting shafted, are the politicians of Tuscaloosa -- Whoops! That's Tallahassee -- spending their time on Creationism and Colt '45s? Because there's a national election right around the corner, that's why.

It is no coincidence that the Republican-controlled legislature is passing measures where last year -- and the year before and the year before that -- they failed. The closer an election gets, the stronger political will becomes. With the presidential election just over the horizon, they are shoring up and offering bon bons to two of the most significant groups within their coalition: gun owners and so-called "Values Voters."

The logic goes something like this: "We supported *you* on one of your most heartfelt issues -- teaching Creationism without fear or taking a concealed weapon to work -- so now we are asking you to support *us* by voting for our candidates. Its a tried-and-true strategy that works. How else to explain the GOP's ability to get people to vote against their self-interest?

Far too often, we have heard candidates giving raucous speeches about the necessity of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, permitting prayer in public schools or enacting a Constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage during their campaigns. And then, when elected, they fall victim

to that peculiar form of laryngitis that lasts precisely 2, 4, or 6 years. During their "muted" years, " . . . seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day."

That's the way things look from "Up North" in South Florida.

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**April 17, 2008**

## **In Defense of [Gulp!] Liberalism**

If I were to open this article with a quote from Karl Marx, would you faint? Would call me a Communist or send an email to Rush or Bill-o? Probably not. However, there are lots of folks who would, which just goes to show how damn dumb, fearful and narrow some people can be. Nonetheless, throwing caution to the wind, here's that quote which, by the way comes from Marx's 1852 work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

*"History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce."*

There, I've gone and done it. Better go and reopen my FBI file and make a new entry.

Truth to tell, "I am not now, nor have I ever been a Communist," to repeat the words used so very often by our Hollywood neighbors back in the late '40s, early 50s. What I am -- as are many of you, dear readers -- is a liberal, whatever in the world that term means in 2008. And despite the fact that the very word -- liberal -- strikes both fear and nausea in the minds of the many mindless, I use it with pride.

The pride comes from the knowledge that were it not for liberals -- there's that word again -- there never would have been Social Security, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Medicare, the Peace Corps, or the Tennessee Valley Authority. That pride is surely increased when one realizes that without liberals there never would have been a Federal Theatre Project, which in turn means that the luminous talents of such folks as Orson Welles, Elmer Rice, Elia Kazan, or Arthur Miller would have died on the vine. Heck, without liberals, it is likely that America would have never gone to war against Hitler and Mussolini.

So what does all this have to do with Marx's comment about history repeating itself first as tragedy and then as comedy?

In a word, plenty.

Through our still brief history as a nation there has been an ongoing tension between rugged individualism and what we might call, for lack of a better term, communitarianism. No, not *communism*, but *communitarianism* -- that which has as its root the word "community." Simply stated, this is a historic tension between those who believe that progress is the result of individual effort, and those who hold that society benefits best when people work together. From the view of politics, it is the difference between believing that government's central role is both safeguarding and protecting individual rights, and the belief that government can -- and where necessary should -- keep the powerful, the entrenched from taking undue advantage of the less powerful, the less entrenched. Roughly speaking this divide between individualist and communitarian is akin to that between conservative and liberal.

Throughout our history, this tension has resulted in both progress and retrogression, comity and antipathy. Time and again, those holding to the more individualistic -- that is the more conservative -- point of view, have tended to vilify the communitarians; to see them as some sort of an unholy alliance bent upon tearing down the very fabric of society. And although the names these communitarians were called may have varied, the purpose has generally been the same: opprobrium.

In early colonial times, they were called "Witches" and subjected to manic trials. At various other times they were labeled "Mason," "Abolitionist," "Anarchist," "Wobbly," "Socialist," "Communist," "Marxist," "Trotskyite," "Leninist," "Stalinist" [as if those throwing these terms about actually understood the difference], and today "Liberal," or the "Far-Left."

When the opprobrious term "Witch" was replaced by the equally obnoxious "Mason," or "Abolitionist," that was history repeating itself as tragedy. Now that "Anarchist," "Socialist" and "Communist" have morphed into "Liberal," that is history as farce -- although it ain't so funny.

To those who eagerly lap up the words of Limbaugh, Hannatty, Coulter and the rest, there is no difference between Communism and Liberalism; they are equally heinous. There is no difference between Democrat X and Democrat Y; they are both accused of working and praying for America's downfall. At one point or another, Senators Biden, Dodd, Kennedy, Edwards, and Gore, Governor Richardson and Speaker Pelosi have all been called "the most liberal person in Washington. Everyone has been linked to George Soros, "Media Matters for America" and Ariana Huffington. It makes no difference who you are; if you aren't in lockstep with the individualists you are . . . egad, a liberal!

Senator Obama is accused of being a "Marxist," having written a "dime-store edition of *Mein Kampf*," and "the favorite candidate of the Islamo-Fascists." Their proof? He doesn't wear an American flag lapel pin; he was once photographed not placing his hand over his heart during the playing of the Star Spangled Banner; he didn't throw Pastor Wright under the bus.

Likewise Senator Clinton: Dick Morris is asked with all the gravity the supposedly liberal Alan Colmes can muster if she was a Communist in the 1970s. She is accused of being a Marxist, a radical feminist and a corporate shill. Tell me: how many Marxists do you know who are moonlighting as corporate shills?

Talk about farce!

- Radio talk-meister Neal Boortz breathlessly proclaims that teachers unions "do more damage to this country than all drug pushers put together."
- Because many liberals are against prayer in the public schools and the teaching of "Creation Science," or believe in a woman's right to choose, all are accused of being anti-God, anti-religion and members in good standing of the "culture of death."
- Those who are in favor of limiting the availability of guns are accused of wanting to have our enemies take over America.
- Those who hold that gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals should be covered by our most basic anti-discrimination laws, are accused of foisting some sort of "gay agenda" on America.
- And on and on and on . . .



At this point in time, the term "liberal" has lost all meaning. It now seems that if you don't like someone's politics, all you have to do is label them a "liberal" or an "ultra leftist" and then walk away. Stigmatize, demonize, objectify, vilify . . . that's the program.

The fact of the matter is that the United States of America has not had an organized "left" worthy of that name for a long, long time. What we do have are millions upon millions of intelligent citizens who firmly believe in the communal necessity of feeding the poor, taking care of the stranger and orphan, being stewards of the good earth, and of not selling our tomorrow's for the sake of today's gain.

Let the rugged individualists call us liberals with all the venom they can muster. They have no idea of just how honorable that word truly is.

*[Many thanks to my cousin Mitzi Dworin for suggesting this topic]*

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## **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**April 25, 2008**

### **When Freckles Become Boulders**

Throughout the journey of life, I have been a collector of precisely five things: baseball cards, books, record albums, Charles Chaplin memorabilia, and political buttons. Of the five, only the books and the Chapliana remain; my dog ate the baseball cards [no, really!], the LPs wore out, and the political pins were stolen while I was living abroad.

Looking back, I truly regret that Blackie, our "mostly Gordon Setter," gnawed on all those cards. If not for this canine caprice, I would probably be on easy street today. I mean, that stash of cards contained some real mint-condition treasures: Mantle, Mays and Snider; Musial, Williams, and Kaline; Banks, Clemente and Feller.

My collection of political buttons -- literally in the hundreds -- included a scarlet penny-sized number emblazoned with "Work for the Red!" [from Earl Browder's 1936 presidential campaign] a stark white one proclaiming "Whack HUAC," and a metallic shoe with a hole-in-the-sole -- which all political junkies in good standing will remember as the symbol of Adlai Stevenson's failed 1952 presidential campaign.

Which brings us to the lapel pin -- or lack thereof -- which, unbelievably, threatens to derail Senator Barack Obama's presidential aspirations. By this point in our interminable campaign season, it is highly likely that more Americans are aware that Senator Obama is frequently photographed *sans* American flag pin, than know where he stands on Immigration, Healthcare, the Economy or any other issue. This sorry turn of events can largely be laid at the feet of our woebegone Fourth Estate, which specializes at turning freckles into boulders and trivia into treason.

Among the other "essential" or "critical" things that the average American "knows" about the junior senator from Illinois are:

- His pastor is a raving lunatic.
- His wife has only recently become "proud to be an American."
- He thinks that America's working class is "bitter."
- He is a latte-sipping elitist.
- He is a Muslim plant.

Then too, there are scads of Americans whose knowledge of Senator Clinton begins with the words "Monica Lewinsky" and ends with the knowledge that last year, she and her husband made over \$20 million.

When it comes to Senator McCain, the words "maverick" and "independent" cohere with stunning frequency. So much so that few seem to realize that he has backtracked on many issues -- most notably the Bush tax cuts. Even fewer seem to care that he warmly accepted the endorsement of the Reverend John Hagee, a man who referred to the Roman Catholic Church as "the great whore," and boldly stated that Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment against New Orleans.

In the overall scope of things, whether or not Senator Obamas wears an American flag lapel pin is of little moment.

It is hauntingly reminiscent of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Those who took Philosophy 101 will recall that at the beginning of *The Republic's* seventh book, Socrates speaks about prisoners who have been chained since childhood deep inside a cave. They see shadows on the cave wall; these they accept as reality. A handful, having freed themselves from their shackles, looks about and perceives various shapes and a light source -- that which is causing the shadows on the cave wall. However, they do not recognize these as the source of the shadows. An even smaller handful venture outside the cave; they come closest to perceiving reality.

For Plato, this is an allegory about education -- *paideia* -- and lack of education -- *apaideusia*. For purposes of this piece, the distinction is between being blind -- *tyflos* -- and being responsible -- *armodios*. That so many have keyed in on the lack of a flag lapel pin is likely the product of

sheer blindness; the fact that the matter will not die is an issue of responsibility. And for this, there is plenty of blame to go around.

Although the tabloid turning of "freckles into boulders" is not exactly new, it is nonetheless both lamentable and deeply worrisome. It makes the American electorate far less informed, far less engaged than it should be. It keeps the vast majority of us concentrating on mere shadows when we should be seeking sources of light. In the vast scope of things, it matters not a whit whether Senator Obama wears a flag pin on his lapel. It says nothing about whether he be a patriot or a scoundrel. Hell's bells, I have on occasion been known to wear a Sandy Koufax jersey; it doesn't make me a flame thrower.

But the question persists. Not a day goes by without Senator Obama being asked why he does not wear that American flag pin -- or place his hand over his heart during "The Star Spangled Banner." It is tantamount to asking that age-old question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" No answer can suffice, for the questioner is, more often than not, seeking entrapment, not elucidation.

Over the past twenty or so years, I have amassed a new collection of political badges and buttons. I have a Gore/Lieberman in Yiddish, a beat-up Bobby Kennedy, even a "Jerry Brown for President." And yes, I do have an American flag lapel pin.

The trouble is, on the back are stamped the words "Made in China."

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April 25, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**May 02, 2008**

## **Rearranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic**

Let's see if we've got this straight:

Senators McCain and Clinton have endorsed a "gas-tax holiday" for the 2008 peak summer driving season. If the proposal is enacted, the government will forgo collecting the 18.4 cent federal tax that is added to each gallon we pump. Senator Obama, who has come out against said tax holiday, has been widely trashed for his opposition.

Let's do a little math:

My 2003 Toyota Solara, which has four cylinders and a manual five-speed transmission, gets about 33 highway and 28 city miles to the gallon. The tank holds just a shade over 15 gallons, which means I get about 450 miles per tank. I religiously fill the old girl up once a week. At 18.4 cents per gallon, I am putting \$2.76 into Uncle Sam's coffers each time I fill up. Multiply that for, say eight weeks of "peak summer driving," and I will save precisely \$22.08 in federal tax. Factor in Annie's Toyota four cylinder Highlander, which has a slightly larger tank and gets about 4 miles per gallon less, and we save a whopping \$45.00 over this eight-week period.

Now, add to this the \$1,200.00 rebate we're going to be receiving in the next couple of weeks, and we'll have just about enough to fly out to California and visit Alice, Riki & Bob, Mitzi & Matt, Leon & Ximena, Leanna, Alan and the gang. Car rental will be extra.

Call me crazy, but I'm with Senator Obama on this one; I think the gas tax holiday is a ridiculous idea whose time has come . . . to be expunged from political dialog. Far from being any kind of quick-fix

for the nation's dolorous economic woes, it is yet another misguided, ill-conceived attempt to curry favor with voters by convincing us that there *is* such a thing as a free lunch.

WRONG!

Last time I looked, if you want bagel 'n lox with a side of cole slaw and an iced tea, you'd better be prepared to pay.

Yes, I certainly understand that those who fill-'er-up more than once a week, along with those who make their living driving the nation's highways -- especially truckers -- will be saving quite a bit more than Annie and me. But what is missing from the equation are a couple of sobering facts:

- For every tax dollar that is forgiven, another indebted dollar gets swallowed up by the bankers of Beijing. This is yet another case of puffing a putative short-term "gain" at the expense of a very real long-term calamity.
- If we assume that tax-forgiveness will permit folks to add even one additional fill-up during the eight week period, that will put more money into Saudi coffers.
- Oil company profits continue setting records [Exxon Mobil, weeping like Bessie Smith, just announced that it earned \$10.9 billion in the first quarter of 2008.]

Some have suggested that if McCain, Clinton *et al* are so hell-bent on enacting this gas tax holiday, they ought to at least figure out where the offset money is going to come from. How's about let's tax excess oil company profits? Yeah right. So long as this -- or any other -- oil-besotted administration reigns, there's about as much chance of that happening as my waking up tomorrow, looking in the mirror, and discovering I've become a five-foot redhead.

In a hastily called press conference the other day, President Bush addressed soaring gas prices and what we can do about it. So what was his prescription? Drilling in the Alaska Natural Wildlife Reserve [ANWAR], building new oil refining plants, and taking another long hard look at both coal and "nukular" energy. All of these are -- or ideally should be -- nonstarters. The proposal to open up ANWAR to drilling is most monstrous of all. For not only would it irreparably

damage much of what the Good Lord created [Something I am sure no Bible-thumping pol would ever want to do!], it would take more than a decade to be up and running. And, to add insult to injury, even if the president's prediction of "one million barrels a day" is correct, it would likely lower gas prices by no more than a penny a gallon.

Of course what's going on here is nothing more, nothing less, than the 2008 version of "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic;" changing light bulbs while the whole house is on fire. No one is addressing alternate sources of energy. No one has the words "wind," "solar" or "geothermal" in their vocabulary. No one is sounding an alarm or issuing a challenge.

The creation and development of renewable sources of energy is both essential and makes good sense from many different perspectives:

- **It is the moral thing to do:** All people of faith -- regardless of whether one pays obeisance to God, Allah, Vishnu, Allah, Buddha or Mother Nature -- agree that we have been placed here to be stewards of the earth. To act otherwise, to blithely denude the good earth of its riches, is to churlishly hurl the works of creation back in the face of the divine.
- **It makes good economic sense:** The creation, manufacture and sales of alternate renewable energy devices can and will create thousands of new businesses and millions of new jobs. It can have the added bonus of taking an overwhelming economic weapon out of the hands of some of the most corrupt, inhumane regimes on earth.
- **These epochal changes are not only essential, they are energizing:** It has been close to a half-century since JFK issued what many deem to be the last significant challenge to the American people. In challenging us to "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," JFK energized an entire nation.

I don't know about you, but if a leader were to, say, issue a "10-Point Program to Create an Energy-Independent America;" have the political skill and courage to get Congress to go along with him or her, and then tell the big oil companies to either get with the program or suffer the consequences, I would feel more focused, more energized,

more optimistic about the future, than at any time in my life. For that leader would, in essence, be instilling within us the belief and understanding that we are a significant part of the solution. Today, all we hear is "there may be a slight problem; trust us to take care of it."

So far as the Stone household is concerned, the government can take our \$45.00 in gas tax savings and apply it as a credit to any company that is building solar panels, wind turbines or an automobile that runs on steam.

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## **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**May 09, 2008**

### **"But That Was Yesterday . . . and Yesterday's Gone"**

We begin with a heartfelt -- albeit *pro forma* -- declaration: Senator John McCain *is* a man of uncommon valor and fortitude. What he went through during his five tortuous years as a P.O.W. is beyond human comprehension. He was tested in ways that not even Franz Kafka could imagine, and emerged to greet the sun of a new day. Senator McCain was, is, and shall always be, a shining example of the ineffable in man.

Having unburdened ourselves of the plaudits due the man, let's get to the subject at hand: the genius of John McCain . . .

For years, editorial writers have used the words "maverick," and "principled" to describe Senator McCain. Time and again, he has been applauded for bucking Republican orthodoxy, for being the "heir" of Teddy Roosevelt. At one point this was undeniably true. Consider that in past years, Senator McCain co-sponsored a patients' bill of rights with liberal stalwarts Ted Kennedy and John Edwards. He united with Senator Chuck Schumer to sponsor one bill allowing the reimportation of prescription drugs and another permitting the wider sale of generic alternatives. All three of these drove the health care industry, the White House and the GOP leadership up the wall. Despite pressure, Senator McCain did not cave.

Senator McCain joined John Kerry in co-sponsoring a bill raising automobile fuel efficiency standards. Another time he teamed up with Joe Lieberman on a measure imposing a cap-and-trade regime on carbon emissions. He was also one of only six Republicans to vote against drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve.

He has worked with Michigan Senator Carl Levin to close tax shelters, co-sponsored bills to close the gun-show loophole and federalize airport

security and, perhaps most notably, voted against both the 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts. Talk about a maverick!

In fact, his moderate *bona fides* were so accepted, so much of the myth that is John McCain, that in 2004, John Kerry actually wooed him to join his ticket as vice president. According to the *New Republic's* Jonathan Chait, the two held no less than a half-dozen clandestine conversations on the topic which, as Chait noted, was "about a half-dozen more than would have been needed if McCain was a dyed-in-the-wool conservative Republican."

At this point, a lyric from Chad and Jeremy comes to mind: ***"But that was yesterday . . . and yesterday's gone."*** [For all you guitar enthusiasts out there, that's E7, A, Bm7-5, E7, A, Bm7-5, A D9, E7.]

Where then is the John McCain of yesteryear? What became of the man who, like T.R., was dead-set against repealing the estate tax, and once called the Reverends Falwell and Robertson "agents of intolerance?" Is this the same man who now wants to make the Bush tax cuts permanent, and is "very honored" to have the endorsements of Pastor Rod ["America was created to destroy Islam"] Pasley and Reverend John ["The Catholic Church is a whore"] Hagee? How is it that a man who spent so many years working in tandem with Feingold, Kennedy, Schumer, Levin *et al*, can now claim the mantle of George W. Bush?

During the Republican primaries, many of the nation's most influential papers lauded McCain as a principled, straight-shooter:

- The *Boston Globe*: "Voters may disagree with his policies, but few doubt his sincerity."
- The *Los Angeles Times*: "The Arizona senator's conservatism is, if not always to our liking, at least genuine."
- The *Wall Street Journal*: "His philosophy is best described as a work in progress."

Truth to tell, McCain's metamorphosis from "maverick" to "true believer" is not all that surprising. After all, he *is* running for president, and will need both the hard-core right and big money if he is to win in November. That's just the way politics works.

What *is* a bit surprising -- and more than a little frustrating -- however, is the relatively free ride he has gotten from the media. Articles and editorials enumerating his many flip-flops are in short supply. Nowhere do we find commentary on his weak, dunderheaded rationalizations about why he wishes to make permanent the very tax cuts he originally voted against. When repeal of the estate tax first hit the senate floor, McClain noted "I follow the course of Teddy Roosevelt who talked about the malefactors of great wealth and gave us the estate tax." Likewise, his votes against both the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts. Today, he declares that voting to make those cuts permanent is not in the least inconsistent: "To let them expire would amount to a tax hike."

Excuse me? Isn't this the height of illogic? While it is perfectly natural for some to oppose -- and others to support -- tax cuts, where is the logic in claiming that the repeal of said cut is tantamount to a tax *hike*? It buggers the imagination.

Those who have made a cottage industry out of harping on Senator Obama's "relationship" with Jeremiah Wright are strangely mute on the subject of the "Straight-Shooter" and *his* ecclesiastic minyan. Where the Reverend Wright spewed his bilge in front of a couple of *thousand* each Sunday, the Reverend Hagee's, national television and radio ministry reaches an estimated 99 *million* homes a week [source: <http://www.ministrywatch.org>]

There has been a great deal of speculation over which Democrat -- Obama or Clinton -- has the best chance of defeating John McCain. Yes, we're well aware of those exit polls that purport to show an unhealthy percentage of Clinton supporters who claim they will vote for McCain if their candidate doesn't capture the nomination. To our way of thinking in early May, those polls don't mean a whole heck of a lot. We've yet to see a head-to-head debate between McCain and Obama. Our money is on the Illinois senator; he has the issues, the message, and ability to make himself understood. And, his thermostat is set a lot lower than McCain's, who has long been known for possessing a volcanic temper.

One wonders if Senator McCain -- unlike Senators Obama or Clinton -- is immune to media scrutiny because "attacking" him -- i.e. revealing the truth -- would be tantamount to trashing an American hero.

It is indeed a long, long journey from working with Ted Kennedy and having serious chats with John Kerry to climbing into bed with John Hagee and Rod Paisley. It takes seven-league boots to make the leap from maverick to mossback.

Chad and Jeremy were right: But that was yesterday, and yesterday's gone.

It only remains to be seen if the American voting public and the Fourth Estate know how to sing that refrain.

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May 09, 2008 in [John McCain](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# **Beating the Bushes:**

## **All Politics, All The Time**

**May 16, 2008**

### **Vos Meinsdie iz Seig?**

Yesterday, in a speech before a group in Columbus, Ohio, Senator John "The Presumptive Republican Nominee" McCain etched a portrait of America and the world circa 2013 that would make even M.C. Escher stand in awe.

For in his speech, McCain predicted that by the end of his first term:

- The Iraq war will have been won.
- al-Qaeda in Iraq will have been defeated.
- A democratic government will be fully operational there.
- Taxes will be lower.
- Congressional earmarks will have been eliminated.
- Robust economic growth will have returned.
- The genocide in Darfur will be a distant memory.
- The Social Security crisis will have been solved.
- Construction on 20 new nuclear power plants will be underway.
- Osama bin Laden will be either dead or captured.

As Arlo Guthrie asked in his classic "The Pause of Mr. Claus," *What's in the pipe that he's smoking?*

It is patently obvious that the senator's remarks are meant to distance himself ever so slightly from President Bush, and get away from his "100 years in Iraq" nonsense. Never mind that he is attempting to open Napoleon Solo's "Channel D" in order to contact independents and so-called "Reagan Democrats." As the old saying goes, "All you who really believe this, I've got this dandy bridge for sale . . ."

Beyond the hollow promises to fix the economy, remake Social Security, eliminate all congressional earmarks -- which, as obnoxious as

they may be, amount to just a shade under .007% of the entire federal budget -- there is the very serious question *Vos Meinsdie iz Seig?* -- Yiddish for, roughly, "*What is the definition of victory?*"

Oh yes, there are plenty of examples of victorious conclusions to bloody wars:

- Lee handing his sword to Grant at Appomattox.
- General Alfred Jodl signing the document of Germany's unconditional surrender at General Eisenhower's Headquarters in Reims, France.
- Japanese Foreign Minister Shigemitsu and General Umezu initialing documents aboard the U.S.S. Missouri.

In these -- and dozens of other -- cases, the combined military might of one set of allies defeated those of their enemies. That is, nations, countries with defined borders, established -- albeit murderous and dictatorial -- governments acknowledged that the other side had beaten them, and it was high time to lay down their arms and take whatever medicine the victors prescribed.

The situation in Iraq is, of course, totally different. First and foremost, America and her "coalition of the willing" are not fighting against the combined forces of any government. Insurgents, terrorists, guerrillas, and suicide bombers do not an army make -- at least in any traditional sense of the term. When government-sponsored forces engage one another in battle, at least they wear different uniforms; one can frequently identify the enemy. In Iraq, anyone -- and everyone -- is potentially the enemy.

Second, armies, navies and air forces are trained to fight wars strategically -- "by the book." In comparison, the conflict in Iraq has no "rules;" what passes for strategy is most often a muddle of murderous inconsistency.

Third, more often than not, when countries become a battlefield, they are defended by their own troops and those of their allies. In Iraq, the lion's share of battle has been undertaken by a military force viewed by most not as a savior, but an invader. When a country is at war with itself,

it is neigh-on impossible to succeed, let alone struggle on to something as illusive as "victory." The historic tensions and animosities betwixt Sunnis, Sh'ias and Kurds had been, in a sense hermetically sealed during Saddam's bloody reign. Once he was deposed, the gruesome genie was unleashed, fueled by the pent-up fury of untold centuries.

And out of all this Senator McCain has a definition for "victory?"

*Vos meinsdie iz seig?*

Then too, there is the Arizona senator's vision of an Iraq with a fully operational, democratic government. To understand the full implication of this dreamy vision, let us take a page from rabbinic literature.

As anyone who has ever read the Hebrew Bible [i.e. *Old Testament*] knows, the Children of Israel spent *forty* years wandering in the wilderness; *forty* years between the end of Egyptian servitude and the beginning of Judean self-governance. According to the *midrash* -- exegetical commentary -- God had originally planned on keeping their journey to a mere *seven* weeks. Why the change?

Most commentators agree that the change was due to the Israelites' base sinfulness and utter lack of trust in the Lord. When Moses did not descend from Mt. Sinai at the precise moment they thought he would, they gave in to their fears and had Aaron create the Golden Calf. In other words, for many commentators, the change from seven weeks to forty years was a punishment for this collective sin.

There is, however, another commentary which shows tremendous understanding of both human nature and political reality. According to this, the forty-year trek was meant to teach a pivotal lesson: that while it is quite easy -- albeit deeply tragic and inhumane -- to turn free people into slaves, it is terribly difficult to turn slaves into free people. To have expected the Israelites -- who had been enslaved for four hundred years -- to suddenly shake off their bonds and fully grasp the ways of freedom, was ludicrous. In making the Children of Israel to wander about for forty years, God was making sure that virtually every man, woman and child who passed over the River Jordan [save Joshua and Caleb] had been born in freedom, not slavery.

This ancient commentary is most instructive in the case of Iraq. By declaring that the Iraqis will be fully self-governing within six-months, three years, a generation, Senator McCain is making the assumption that former slaves are both longing for -- and capable of -- governing themselves. This is a dangerous, delusional trap into which Senator McCain and most of his Republican colleagues have fallen.

Just as there is no hard and fast definition of "victory" in Iraq, so too should there be no illusion about just how difficult it will be for them to remake themselves into a modern democratic state. It will take at least a generation, if not two . . . or three . . . or longer.

Senator McCain is correct in beginning to talk about bringing our troops home at some point in the future. But to link the words "Iraq" and "democracy" with the year 2013 is sheer folly.

Like the sign says, "If you break it, you pay for it . . ."

May 16, 2008 in [War and Peace](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(5\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

May 23, 2008

## Mr. Obama Goes To Shul

BOCA RATON, FLORIDA \* Senator Barack Obama came to Temple *B'nai Torah* this afternoon. As will often happen with candidates out on the campaign trail, his arrival was delayed by several hours. And although he apologized for being tardy and making us wait, he never did mention the *reason* for his delay. As I found out later that night, he had hopped up to Capitol Hill in order to vote in favor of a measure which greatly expands the G.I. Bill. He could have taken the high, self-serving road and told those assembled why he was late. He could also have taken the low, "finger-pointing" road and flailed Senator McCain for being one of 22 Republicans voting *against* our men and women in uniform.

Instead, he did neither.

This was not his reason for going to *shul*.

Rather, he was here, in the midst of approximately 750 mostly-Jewish men, women and teens, to talk about himself, Israel, and anti-Semitism, and to address head-on the virtual St. Vitus' dance of fear that has been such a noxious staple of cyberspace this past year

I managed to snag a VIP pass and, guiltily walking past the long line of folks standing out in the rain, was seated about 6 feet away from the senator. Sitting with me were -- somewhat surprisingly -- at least three lions of the Republican Party and a couple of die-hard Clinton acolytes. They, like so many in the assembled *minyan*, were *not* there because they already

supported Senator Obama. Rather, *they* had come to find out for themselves just who the "skinny guy with the strange-sounding name" is, and whether or not he will be as bad for Israel as so many have claimed.

Senator Obama certainly had his work cut out for himself.

To make the senator's task even more challenging, just the day before he attended *shul*, the *New York Times* ran a story entitled "*Many Florida Jews Express Doubts On Obama*." In the article, staff writer Jodi Kantor quoted a handful of South Florida Jews who were dismissive -- if not downright hostile -- to Senator Obama's candidacy. One elderly woman said she would never vote for Obama "because of his attitude on Israel." A second averred that Obama "is part of Chicago's large Palestinian community." A third worried that if he were elected, Obama "might fill his administration with followers of Louis Farrakhan." And yet a fourth opined, "His father was a Muslim and you can't take that out of him."

No one ever said running for president was easy; especially when you're a guy named Barack Obama, and you're speaking in a synagogue before more Jews than the rabbi has seen since last *Rosh Hashana*.

With a mesmerizing mix of eloquence and erudition, articulation and affability, the Senator won over the vast majority of the *assembled minyan*. During the more than two hours he spent speaking and dialoguing, Senator Obama made it abundantly clear that he was, is, and always shall be, a staunch defender of the Jewish State. [*One should know a **fact**: after going over the voting records of both Senator Clinton and Obama vis-a-vis issues pertaining to Israel, AIPAC -- the main Israel support lobby in the U.S. gave both a 100% rating. That's 100% of the time that both senators voted in a manner that was favorable to the Jewish State.*]

Senator Obama told of how, as a youngster attending summer camp, he had a Jewish counselor who told him about Zionism:

*"I really connected with it, because in Zionism, there is this sense of rootedness, of having a place and a home. And for a kid with my unusual background . . . and not knowing precisely where I fit, this struck a tremendous chord."*

When asked about his relationship with a Palestinian professor from the University of Chicago, the Senator said:

*"Yes, I have met the man, but why do people automatically conclude that therefore I must be in agreement with what he espouses? People do have the ability to listen to those with whom they disagree. How can one ever make any progress if the only folks they talk to are those with whom they are in agreement?"*

Obama went on to say:

*"I don't want to get in to the 'some of my best friends are Jewish' trap, because it's terribly demeaning. But I will tell you this: when I first ran [unsuccessfully] for Congress against Bobby Rush, the main argument against me was that I was too close to the Jewish community! I have always believed that Jewish and African Americans have an historic bond, an historic memory. I mourn the passing of the time when Jewish Americans and African Americans worked together in harmony to bring about change. If it weren't for the Jewish community and their central role in the Civil Rights struggle, I wouldn't be here today, running for President of the United States."*

Addressing all the emails that are going around [indeed, I just received one entitled "The Fifty Lies of Barack Obama"], he made a telling point with a fine degree of humor:

*"You know, no one believes those emails that start out: 'I'm a Nigerian who has \$5 million in the bank but can't get at it . . .*

*however if you'll only send me a thousand dollars . . .' Or all those medicines that promise to help expand your . . . well, let's not go there . . . [laughter] . . . But seriously, why then do people believe scurrilous rumors? Promising millions for nothing or potency for pennies has about as much reality as proclaiming that I am a Jihadist."*

Many in the crowd were of the opinion that "George W. Bush is the best friend Israel has ever had." I hear this from my students more often than is comfortable. Senator Obama addressed this in words of stark simplicity:

*"In the past seven years, Iran has become infinitely more powerful than ever before. It has given tremendous financial support to the major enemies of Israel. This has all happened under the Bush-Cheney-McCain watch. How can anyone conclude that the one who empowers your worst enemy is your best friend? It doesn't make any sense."*

One person in the crowd asked why, in saying he would convene a summit meeting of all Arab countries, he excluded Israel, Obama smiled and answered:

*"Well first, Israel isn't an Arab country; its a Jewish State. Secondly, they are our strongest ally . . . our best friend in the region. The countries we would be talking to are the ones we want to convince that someday, somehow, they're going to have to learn how to live in peace with Israel. If you only talk to your friends, there is absolutely no chance that you're ever going to be able to change your enemies. That is part of the definition of courage"*

By way of example, Senator Obama mentioned how, when speaking before students at a school of Ramallah, he told them, "One day you are going to have to learn to live in peace with Israel."

Did Senator Obama's "performance" make supporters out of everyone in attendance? Probably not, for he is, as we say in Hebrew, *raq basar va'dahm* ["merely flesh and blood"]. Nonetheless, I believe he quelled the fear and uncertainty in many hearts.

There no doubt will always be those who choose to believe the worst about Senator Obama -- or anyone in the public eye for that matter. There will also always be those who seek to hide incipient racism beneath the veneer of inept rhetoric. And believe me, I am fully expecting people to write and tell me that I have had the wool pulled over my eyes -- that Senator Obama is a Muslim, ant-Semitic . . . the whole nine yards.

And yet, for at least one afternoon, in one *shul*, the *minyan* had the opportunity to listen to -- and share with -- a man who reminded us that the Arabic *barack* and the Hebrew *baruch* share the same meaning: "Blessed."

It was a "sermon" well worth the wait.

Oh yes: by the end, even the three Republicans were on their feet.

And don't worry about being late Senator. You see, ever since Sinai, we've been on Jewish Standard Time . . .

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## Beating the Buses:

All Politics, All The Time

May 30, 2008

## Beam *Yourself* Up Scottie!

### Message to Scottie:

So now you're beaming *yourself* up? Sorry to have to inform you of this Scottie, but your job has always been to beam the others up, not yourself. For several years, it was your task to make others look good; to safely transport them to that vast clime where "no one has gone before." Before your debarkation, it was your job to transform dross into gold and water into wine. You were the one crew member whose job spec read "Protect us from our lies, our posturing and ourselves."

Scottie, have you misplaced the script? Have you forgotten the Prime Directive? Obviously you have. For in publishing *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, you are effectively beaming *yourself* up into the vast empyrean of *mea culpa*. That's simply not the way things are suppose to be.

Are we supposed to be grateful for your memoir? Are we supposed to rush out and purchase a copy, thereby paving over your guilt with gelt? I fear that that's what's going to happen, despite the fact that all the awful truths you've "revealed" most of us have long suspected in haunting principle -- if not known in absolute fact. And even if we agree with your take on how Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rove and the gang lied us into Iraq -- the lies they told about 9/11, Saddam, and WMDs -- the fact remains that not only did they [by your own admission] know all along they were telling lies, but *you, you* were the one giving voice to these lies, day in day out. You were the one beaming them up. As such, you are as culpable as the men and women who put these mendacities into your mouth.

Then there is the case of Valerie Plame. What Rove, Libby and the rest of the crew did in outing her -- and just to get back at her husband, Ambassador Wilson -- is 100% against the law. It doesn't really matter whether you were

"misled" as you now claim; the damage was done, an actionable crime was committed.

I do agree that the White House press corps was too easy on you and the crew -- uh, administration -- on the run-up to Iraq. They showed an unconscionable lack of backbone and grit in not challenging every word, comma and semicolon. But please, do not tell us that you now wish they'd only asked the hard questions; you know in your heart of hearts that you would have swatted their questions away like noxious flies at a picnic.

Scottie, don't be too surprised if one day soon you wake up to discover that, short of beaming yourself to some celebrious haven, you have rematerialized in front of a hostile Congressional committee or federal grand jury. For the words, deeds, and machinations you have detailed in your book are, in the estimation of people with knowledge far greater than mine, legally actionable. Should it come to this, would you seek the cloak of immunity -- or forgetfulness? Do you understand that you may well have the power to underscore, *highlight* and **make bold** this administration's position as the absolute worst, most disastrous in American history?

Already, your erstwhile friends and compatriots are hurling lethal thunderbolts your way, characterizing you as nothing more than a "disgruntled former employee," a "turncoat" who is "out to make a quick buck." Tell me Scottie: when you first sat down to write this book, did you have any idea of the treacherous terrain to which you were beaming yourself? Did you really, truly think that you could teleport yourself on to a new career?

Don't be too surprised if FOX News doesn't come calling, hefty contract in hand. For in order to profit from sin, you have to be Ollie North or G. Gordon Liddy.

In closing Scottie, it may well be that you haven't yet reached the "final frontier." But one can hope that ultimately, in beaming yourself up, you have set the stage for the Bushies to be beamed down -- as far down as history and the courts will allow.

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# Beating the Bushes:

## All Politics, All The Time

June 05, 2008

### The Obama Minyan

Now that Senator Obama is the *de facto* [I hate the word "presumptive"] Democratic nominee, the slings and arrows of yesterday are about to become the Titans and Tomahawks of tomorrow. Make no mistake about it: the Republicans will attack him with every missile in their silo. And like the "MIRV" [*Multiple Independently targetable Reentry Vehicle*], their political projectiles are going to be aimed at lots and lots of different targets.

Indeed, there will be something for everyone:

- **Economic Elitists** will no doubt be clubbed with the fear that an Obama presidency will lead to the ultimate victory of Marx over Monetarism.
- **Social Conservatives** will be warned that an Obama Administration will make abortion, same-sex marriage and the teaching of Evolution mandatory.
- **Conspiracy Theorists** will be convinced that an Obama cabinet will include Louis Farrakhan, Pastor Wright and perhaps even the ghost of Emma Goldman.
- **Zionists** will be taught that an Obama foreign policy will sound the death-knell for the Jewish State.
- **And of course**, the words "lack of experience" will become so ever-present that schoolchildren will no doubt conclude that this must be the senator's middle name.

Already, one can hear those MIRVs warming up in their silos.

Let's handle the last two, because to a great extent, they are inextricably bound together. It is absolutely true that Senator Obama has not been on the national scene nearly as long as Senator McCain. And, it is equally as true that he has no eponymous legislation for which he can claim credit, ala the "McCain-Feingold" Act. I for one have often found the "experience issue" to be a non-starter. To my way of thinking, its not always "**what** you know," but "**who** you know and trust that knows what you **need** to know." If one only peeks behind the curtain of their fears and uncertainties [amply cheer-led by conservative bloggers and all those "entertainers" who pass themselves off as mainline journalists], one will discover something truly heartening: that Senator Barack Obama has surrounded himself with a roster of the "best and brightest," the likes of which have not been seen since the days of JFK. I will match up Obama's experts and wise men and women against those of McCain six days a week -- and on the seventh we rest.



Which brings us to the issue of Senator Obama vis-a-vis Israel.

Much has been made over the past months, weeks and even days, about the number of so-called "professional Israel haters/anti-Semites" who are "advising" the gentleman from Illinois. Anyone with email service has received screaming cyber missives warning that Obama is getting all his Israel/Middle East input from the likes of former Carter-era National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Kennedy School's Stephen Walt, the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer and now, former Michigan Representative [and Edwards' campaign manager] David Bonior.

While none of the aforementioned is going to be invited to our next *seder*, the influence they have -- and will have -- on Senator Obama's future Middle Eastern strategy is effectively nil, nada, zilch, *gornisht*.

As noted in our February 21, 2008 piece -- *The Truth About It*:

*"According to David Axelrod, the senator's chief strategist, ' . . . [Brzezinski] is not an adviser. We do not call him an adviser and he does not call himself an adviser. He is a supporter of Senator Obama and they have spoken about the Iraq war once several months ago . . . . The only people who call Brzezinsky an adviser are the Clinton campaign . . . ."*

So far as professors Walt and Mearsheimer go, their names originally became linked to the Obama campaign some time back. Under what circumstances? Well, last year, the two professors published a work entitled *The Israel Lobby and American Foreign Policy*. Truth to tell, it painted a woeful, damning portrait of A.I.P.A.C. and the power it wields in Washington. It so happens that the Obama campaign's cyber nerds placed small ads in various spots on the Internet, designed to drive readers to its website. From experience, I can tell you that the best way to accomplish this is to put in a string of key words . . . like "politics," "Democratic," or "president." This is precisely what the Obama camp did. Well, one of these ads popped up on the Amazon page hawking Walt and Mearsheimer's book. Immediately, the anti-Obama forces began proclaiming "You See! Obama is one of those Israel haters!" Once this was brought to the Obama campaign's attention, they removed the ad. But *viola*, the damage had been done; suddenly and miraculously, Walt and Mearshmer had been transformed into "senior Obama advisers." They were not, and are not.

David Bonior, who signed on with the Obama campaign just in time to represent it -- along with Congressman Robert Wexler -- before the Democratic National Committee, did not have a great voting record vis-a-vis Israel. And while not trying to soft-peddle his votes -- many of which I find just wrong -- one does well to remember that his district was home to the highest percentage of Palestinians of any district in the United States. And while one can -- and should -- revile many of the votes he cast while in Congress -- which I do -- one must keep in mind that the first rule of politics is "get yourself [re]elected." Then too, Bonoir was *not* hired because of his positions on the Middle East, but precisely because, as a former Michigan powerhouse, it was felt that he could best

state the Obama case vis-a-vis delegates. Also, by bringing him on board, it was a clear sign that John Edwards was about to support the campaign.

So just who *is* advising Senator Obama on Israel and the Middle East? Who makes up "The Obama Minyan?" [***n.b.*** A "*minyan*" is a lawful quorum of ten Jewish adults -- some authorities say only men -- required for reciting Jewish prayers.]

A bit of research available to anyone who wants to know the truth, turns up the following "minyanares:"

- **Rep. Robert Wexler:** Rob, who I am proud to say is *my* representative in Congress, is a devoutly religious, Miami-bred member of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. As early as 2002 he was calling for the ouster of terrorist leaders in the Mideast and declared that Israel was engaged in full-scale war. When it comes to supporting the Jewish State, no one takes a backseat to Congressman Wexler.
- **Former Rep. Mel Levine:** Mel, a good friend of longstanding [who ironically, was my representative when I was still living in Southern California], was a member of the House from 1982-1992. Mel comes from a family whose allegiance to Israel is legendary: in 1948, his late father Sid was Western States' representative for the *Haganah*. Indeed, one of Mel's earliest memories, as he recounted for my book, *The Congressional Minyan: The Jews of Capitol Hill* was: ". . . as a five-year old hearing the doorbell ring . . . and being knocked over by a gunny sack filled with God knows what. . . and my dad grabbing me and basically throwing me away from the door. I learned many years later that that was some type of materiel that was on its way to Israel during the War of Independence." During his years in the House, Mel's was one of the most intelligent and passionate voices ever raised on Israel's behalf. Bar none.
- **Ambassador Dan Kurtzer:** Dan was President Clinton's Ambassador to Egypt from 1997-2001, and President George W. Bush's Ambassador to Israel from 2001-2005. Prior to entering foreign service, he was dean of his *alma mater*, Yeshiva University. Now retired, Dan is the first-ever commissioner of the Israel Baseball League. [Which, by the way, drafted Sandy Koufax!]
- **Former U.S. Senator Tom Daschle:** Yes, I know, Tom is a Catholic, so technically, cannot be counted in a "minyan." Nonetheless, during all his years in the House and Senate [where he was Minority Leader], Tom was among Israel's strongest and most consistent supporters. Despite coming from a state [South Dakota] that is home to precisely 99 Jews, Tom is well-known for his efforts on behalf of the Jewish State. I first met him back in 1986, when he came to South Florida to get acquainted with the Jewish community. Following a luncheon speech at the Woodlands Country Club, one of the Zionist lions asked him "what was the family name before Daschle? Are you sure you're not Jewish?"
- **Rep. Jan Schakowsky:** Jan has represented a Chicago-area district [9] in the House since 1998. One simply cannot be elected and reelected by such wide

margins [75% in 2006, 76% in 2004] from Evanston/Skokie unless they are actively, stridently, vociferously pro-Israel. And this Jan is.

- **Penny Pritzker:** Scion of the Hyatt Hotel chain and herself the founder/Chair/CEO of "Classic Residency by Hyatt," Penny is one of the wealthiest women in the world. Holder of a Harvard degree in economics, and a graduate of the Stanford University Law School, Penny is part of a family that has been among Israel's strongest financial backers for more than two generations. Penny is the Obama campaign's national finance director; as such the senator has come under intense fire from *anti-Zionist* groups who claim that he is "in the pocket of the Zionists." How can one be anti-Israel and at the same time get slammed by the true haters of Israel for being "overly Zionist?" Beats me.
- **Anthony Lake:** The grandson of a Church of England clergyman who came the United States from Oxford to teach New Testament Studies at Harvard, Tony Lake converted to Judaism in 2005. He has long been a foreign policy advisor to Democrats. When questioned by *Moment Magazine* about his support for Barack Obama vis-a-vis Israel, Lake responded: *"The question is: Which America is the strongest friend of Israel? Which America will be the strongest adversary to those who would do us harm? And clearly, the answer is an America that is unified rather than torn apart by the politics of the past 20 years. And it is in Obama's DNA to be a unifier while having clear views."*
- **Denis McDonough:** Senior Fellow at American Progress and former Legislative Director for Colorado Senator Ken Salazar, Denis is currently the Obama Campaign's Foreign Policy Coordinator. He is an acknowledged expert on Israeli-Arab relations; an area of expertise that has been sorely lacking for the past eight years. Denis is a stalwart supporter of Israel, and despite the fact that he is not "MOT" ["A Member of the Tribe"] he is without question a member-in-good-standing of the Obama Minyan.
- **Dan Shapiro:** Former Foreign Policy Adviser to Florida Senator Bill Nelson. Dan was responsible for writing the "Syria Accountability Act of 2003," which was intended among other things, to "halt Syrian terrorism and its occupation of Lebanon . . . and to hold Syria accountable for its role in the Middle East." This measure was co-sponsored by California Senator Barbara Boxer and Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum. That bill became law in December 2003. Dan also drafted a 2007 measure that prohibits US contacts with Palestinian leadership. He was brought on board largely on the strength of his close relations with AIPAC.
- **Lee Rosenberg:** A Chicago-based independent venture capitalist, Lee is both a member of the Obama Campaign finance team, and, perhaps most importantly, the Treasurer of AIPAC. For anyone who watched the senator's address before AIPAC the other day, that was Lee who did the introduction.

And these, my friends are the front-line members of the Obama Minyan.

Unquestionably, there will continue to be lots of folks out there from Compton to Caribou who will continue believing [and spreading] lies about Barack Obama being al-Qaeda's "Manchurian Candidate," a "secret Muslim," and an "anti-Semite." Let's face it:

for some people, facts cannot hold a candle to fiction; intrigue is a lot more entertaining than intelligence.

As for me, I am both proud and humbled to be a part of the Obama Minyan. And although it has been a longstanding Jewish tradition to never go out seeking "converts," in this instance, and for this purpose, I will gladly break with tradition.

How about you?

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**June 12, 2008**

## **"Preserve," Support" "Protect," and "Defend" -- Four Words That Should Matter**

In reviewing the 183 articles I've posted since this site's inception back in February of 2005, I was intrigued to discover that four were on the subject of Impeachment. The first of these, *Villainova*, was posted back on December 23, 2005; the most recent, *To Impeach or Not to Impeach: Why is There a Question?* ran on November 15, 2007. The February 23, 2006 piece carried the straightforward, not terribly imaginative title *Impeach George Bush!* In rereading the articles -- including the July 26, 2007 piece entitled *Bush's Tush* -- I was both amazed and downhearted to find that the four had engendered a total of two -- precisely TWO -- comments. On the other hand, my recent pieces on Senator Obama have garnered enough commentary -- some diligently thoughtful, some patently ugly -- to fill a fair-sized filing cabinet.

Well, ready or not, here comes the fifth op-ed piece on Impeachment -- but with a bit of a difference.

I am *not* going to argue either the correctness or the necessity of impeaching Bush and Cheney; in an ideal world, they would have been hauled before the Judiciary Committee a long time ago.

I am *not* going to enumerate the 35 articles that Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich so painstakingly read into *The Congressional Minyan* two nights ago; although chilling to the max, it makes for boring reading.

I am *not* going to wager on the chances of Impeachment or criminal indictment ever becoming reality; if I want to place a bet, it will be on something with better odds for success -- like the Florida Lottery or Irish Sweepstakes.

I am *not* going to bemoan the fact that in the past 48 hours, the national media has run precisely 2,744 articles on "killer tomatoes," to a mere 240 on impeachment; we the people are as much to blame as the media for this grossly lopsided statistic.

And, I am *not* going to tar Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leaders Hoyer and Reid or the rest of Congress with the brush of cowardice; why waste good ink on that which is -- or at the least damn well ought to be -- painfully obvious?

Madam Speaker has already staked herself to a position: that Impeachment would be a waste of time considering that the Bush Administration is now in its lame-duck phase. She's also worried that Republicans would use Impeachment as a club with which to beat Democrats in the 2008 election. Then too, she says that "Congress can use its time more wisely on the real problems we face." OK, you tell me: what do you expect from Congress in the next several months on such issues as the housing crisis, the price of gas, health insurance, the war in Iraq, global warming or a couple of dozen other critical issues?

Instead, let's talk about what *not* initiating impeachment proceedings means; about the sorry state of words, deeds, integrity and *We the People*.

In pouring over what I believe to be a representative sampling of articles and commentary out here in Cyberspace, I've noticed that people break down into two heavily-barricaded camps:

- Those who firmly believe that Bush, Cheney and their confreres are the second coming of Benedict Arnold -- if not Vlad the Impaler, and
- Those who are absolutely convinced that anyone and everyone supporting Impeachment is a Looney Tune.

While all this angry, defensive finger-pointing, this resorting to *ad hominem* argumentation may make for good theatre, it fairly ignores what is truly at stake: the very future of the United States of America as envisioned by the Founders. Jefferson, Adams, Hancock, Monroe and the rest thoroughly rejected the royalist principles that "*l'etat, c'est moi*," and "The king can do no wrong." These brilliant products of the Enlightenment fully understood that if the United States was to succeed, it had to be a "nation of laws, and not of men." They didn't just talk a good game; they staked their lives, fortunes and reputations on it. Who today has that much gumption or conviction?

Somewhere along the lines, we lost that understanding. Far too often as both a polity and a society, we are far more interested in next week, the next election, the next fiscal quarter, than we are with the next generation or the generation after that. We fail to understand that indebtedness doesn't just accrue to Visa or Mastercard, China, India or Saudi Arabia, but to history as well. Far too often we calculate our indebtedness -- whether personal, corporate or national -- only in terms of dollars and cents. What we have failed to calculate is our future indebtedness in terms of peace and progress, optimism, progressivism and [small-r] republicanism.

When Congress gleefully impeached President Bill Clinton for perjury and extramarital *shtupping*, much of the world chuckled; to them, it was both partisan and incredibly frivolous. But when Congress refuses to even consider impeachment proceedings against President Bush and/or Vice President Cheney for their very real "high crimes and misdemeanors," much of the world cringes. They see America's moral compass becoming irreparably smashed and beaten.

When one takes the oath of office, they place their right hand on a Bible -- or in the case of Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison a Koran *after* the Bible -- and solemnly swear to "*Support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic; that I will bear true allegiance to the same. . .*" It seems to me that these words -- especially the verbs "support" and "defend" have lost all meaning. For what is at stake is not just the future of George W. Bush or Dick Cheney, individual Democrats or Republicans, the outcome of the next election, but the very fabric of this nation "of laws, not of men." By standing blithely by and permitting so many laws to be broken, so many lies to be papered over, so much liberty to be abased, it darkens the American skies with the ominous thunderclouds of self-destruction.

History, of course will have the final word. It has never ceased to amaze me how many of yesterday's headline-making "loonies" are today's forgotten heroes. A couple of examples:

In his day, Wisconsin Representative *Victor Berger* was called "the most dangerous man in America." His "crime?" He dared to talk about the need for a national system of old-age pensions back before World War I.

In the late 1920s a New York Representative by the name of *Fiorello LaGuardia* was labeled "a grandstanding lunatic" for proposing much of what would within three years be called "The New Deal."

As early as 1935, New York Representative *Emanuel Celler* was scoffed at for warning that the creation of a House committee to investigate so-called "un-American activities" would likely make "the mere harboring of unpopular opinions" a federal crime.

And now there's Representative *Dennis Kucinich* -- who is already being called every vile name in the book -- for having the "temerity" to nail his 35 Articles of Impeachment on the House door.

I do not pretend to know what history's verdict will be so far as George W. Bush and his administration go. As the saying goes, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet." What I *do* know, however, is that unless -- and until -- we come to understand that such verbs as "preserve," "protect," "support" and

"defend" have real meanings with real consequences, our debt to future generations will be far far greater than our debt to Visa, Mastercard or China.

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June 12, 2008 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)



# Beating the Bushes:

## All Politics, All The Time

June 19, 2008

### "Strict Contortionists" [or] "One Man's Ceiling is Another Man's Floor"

OK ladies and gentlemen, on the count of three, let's all heave a great big collective sigh of relief:

One, two, three . . . "Aaaaah"!

I'm sure that's how a lot of us feel now that the Supreme Court has finally handed down its decision in *Boumediene et al v. Bush*, the case that -- at least for now -- keeps *habeas corpus* alive and kicking. In rendering its razor-thin 5-4 decision, the court has stingingly rebuked President Bush and all his *Hey! Don't you know that America's at war with radical Islamists?* allies. In its landmark decision, Justices Kennedy, Stevens, Souter, Breyer and Ginsburg have held that *habeas corpus* protections **do apply** to detainees held at Guantanamo Bay. And despite what Chief Justice Roberts and his, brethren Scalia, Alito and Thomas claim, *Boumediene v. Bush* will neither place America in greater peril nor free prisoners from their padlocked cells. What it does do is underscore the continued centrality of the United States Constitution -- even in a time of war.

Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy noted that "Liberty and security can be reconciled; and in our system they are reconciled within the framework of law."

Justice Scalia's scathing 25-page dissent reads more like a political broadside than a reasoned legal brief:

- "The game of bait-and-switch that today's opinion plays upon the Nation's Commander in Chief **will make the war harder on us. It will almost certainly cause more Americans to be killed.**"
- "Today the **Court warps the Constitution.**"
- "**The nation will live to** regret what the Court has done today."
- "[This decision] breaks a chain of precedent as old as the common law that prohibits judicial inquiry into detentions of aliens abroad absent statutory authorization."

- "Most tragically, it sets our military commanders the impossible task of proving to a civilian court . . . that evidence supports the confinement of each and every enemy prisoner."

If I understand the dissenting opinion correctly, a large part of the argument rests on the "fact" that since Guantanamo is not on American soil, the Constitution does not apply to those "enemy combatants" housed there. Well now, if our base in Guantanamo is not, for legal purposes, considered part of the United States, then it logically follows that Senator John McCain is debarred from running for President of the United States; he was, after all, born on a military base in the Panama Canal Zone, and according to Justice Scalia, that base was not a part of the United States.

As they say in legalese, *Res ipsa loquitur* -- "The thing speaks for itself." [Yes yes, I know, literally it should be rendered "The thing itself speaks," but let's not split fine hairs.]

Those decrying the majority decision claim that now, dozens -- if not hundreds -- of suspected terrorists will be free to go back home and start blowing us up all over again. Granting the right of *habeas corpus* to this group -- so Scalia and his supporters argue -- will place America in grave peril. Well, even retired General Colin Powell disagrees. Speaking on the very issue last year, Powell said:

*"The concern was, well, then they'll have access to lawyers, then they'll have access to writs of habeas corpus. So what? Let them. Isn't that what our system's all about? And by the way, America, unfortunately, has too many people in jail, all of whom had lawyers and access to writs of habeas corpus. And so we can handle bad people in our system."*

Be prepared for a watered-down version of this decision to become part of Senator McCain's presidential campaign. We've all heard the argument before: "If you don't elect me, sure as God made little green apples, the Democrats are going to appoint *activist judges* to the Supreme Court . . . and then where will we be?" Further, he and his surrogates will argue that "A vote for John McCain is a vote for 'strict constructionists,' judges who, far from enacting new law, will rely only on what is actually written in the Constitution!"

This argument -- about "activist" versus "strict constructionist" judges -- has been part of the Republican playbook ever since the days of Richard Nixon. In recent years, it has become code for "If you elect a Republican, he will only appoint judges who will overturn *Roe v. Wade* and make sure that you can have

prayer in the public schools." Well my goodness, we've had lots of these so-called "strict constructionists" on the bench for the past two decades, and *Roe v. Wade* is still the law of the land. Ironically, overturning this decision would be a Republican's worst nightmare; what would they then have to rail against? How ever could they keep their conservative and evangelical friends voting for them?

From where I sit, Roberts, Scalia, Alito and Thomas are not "strict constructionists" in any sense of the term. At best, *they* are judicial activists; at worst, what might be termed "judicial contortionists." It never ceases to amaze me how, that when Republicans agree with a judge, he or she is a "strict constructionist;" but when they disagree, its because the juror is a so-called "activist."

Paul Simon said it best: "One man's ceiling is another man's floor."

To my way of thinking, left to their own devices, Roberts, Scalia, Alito and Thomas are -- *in potentia* -- the very definition of "activists" judges. *They* are the ones seeking to make new law, rather than rendering law based upon a literal reading of the Constitution.

One of the issues best kept in mind when deciding whether to vote for Senator McCain or Senator Obama is this matter of "activist" versus "strict-contortionist" judges. The court is now just one "strict contortionist" Justice away from being as fully conservative as it was in the days of William Howard Taft. Justice John Paul Stevens [the man who replaced Justice William O. Douglas] turned 88 a month ago; you can bet he's going to be retiring in the very near future. And although Justice Anthony Kennedy is a very spry 72, he is far from predictable. Knowing that he is the current "swing vote" on the Supreme Court isn't too great for one's sense of well-being. His legal instincts are far closer to Roberts and Scalia than to Souter or Ginsburg.

I can think of lots of good reasons to enthusiastically prefer Senator Obama to Senator McCain. But after witnessing just how close we all came to losing *habeas corpus* this week, the issue of appointing Justices to the Supreme Court has broken away from the pack and is now heading into the lead.

## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

June 25, 2008

# What Pray Tell is the "Enron Loophole?"

Its never ceases to amaze how every week brings new words and phrases into the national political vocabulary, especially during election season. Some, like "Creationism" "Stagflation," "sound byte," and "Swiftboating" have become so familiar as to elicit nary a hiccup from one's computer spell-check. Others, like "Teapot Dome," "vicuña coat," "hanging chad" and "The Keating Five" are best known to those of us who proudly wear the political junkie's lapel pin -- a garland of placards in a field of greenhouse gases.

The latest -- and potentially most damaging is the "Enron Loophole." And although my spell-check is none too certain what to make of "Enron," Google sure does; as of ten minutes ago, a search for that term brought up no less than 175,000 different sites. Within less time than it takes to solve the Rubik's Cube [another term that the old spell-checker recognizes] the "Enron Loophole" has become so omnipresent that one would presume that everyone knows to what it refers.

For those who don't we humbly offer -- as a public service to our readers -- a brief history, synopsis and *dramatis personae* of that which could -- and undoubtedly *should* -- become the one 2008 election-year phrase that will live in everlasting infamy. For the "Enron Loophole" is one, which by all rights, should surpass "Whiskey Ring," "Credit Mobilier," and "Abscam."

Back in 2000, then-Texas Senator Phil Gramm slipped a little-noted Enron-backed provision into the Commodities Futures Modernization Act. Simply stated, this provision exempted from regulation energy trading on so-called "electronic platforms" or "dark markets." Heretofore, energy trading [electricity, natural gas, etc.] was done mainly under the auspices of either the Commodity Futures Trading Commission [which was chaired during the first Bush Administration by Senator Gramm's wife Wendy] or the heavily-regulated New York Mercantile Exchange [NYMEX]. Their rules and regulations are in place in order to "prevent price distortions and supply

squeezes." With passage of the Gramm-sponsored, Enron-backed bill, traders and speculators moved the lion's share of their business over to the *unregulated* Atlanta-based Intercontinental Exchange [ICE] -- the so-called "dark market."

It should be noted that at the time of its enactment, Republicans controlled Congress, and Senator Gramm was the Senate Banking Committee chair; even worse, his wife Wendy, not five weeks after leaving CFTC was named an Enron director. The bill, which was signed by President Clinton in December of that year, was approved without so much as a Senate hearing. Internal Enron documents which were released in 2002 [after the company had imploded and gone bye-bye] reveal that the then-Houston based company not only helped write the legislation, but baldly lobbied Senator Gramm ["Gramm needs to fully understand how helpful the bill is to Enron," went one internal memo].

Within a year of its being freed from "regulatory interference," Enron began creating false energy shortages in California. They wound up bilking consumers out of an estimated \$40 billion. And despite the new Bush Administration's attempts to come to come to Enron's rescue -- W. personally joined in with those fighting against imposing caps on soaring electricity prices -- the Houston energy giant soon went the way of the Stegosaurus and Slide Rule.

But wait; there's more!

In 2006, the "Enron Loophole" permitted a hedge fund called "Amaranth Advisers" to corner the natural gas market. Now trading on the unregulated "dark market," the Amaranth "hedgies" wallowed up to the crap table, plunked down their gelt, and bet that futures prices on natural gas would go "up, up, up and away!"

Oops!

In September 2006, natural gas prices fell to a two-year low. Amaranth Advisers lost their well-heeled clients about \$6 billion, thus proving the truth of the old axiom "He who plays around with unregulated energy futures will most likely get torched." About a year ago, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission [FERC] charged Amaranth with manipulating prices and has suggested a fine of \$291 million plus the forfeiture of "unjust profits,"

whatever that means.

It is highly likely that the high price of oil is also a result of unregulated activity in the "dark market." Recently, Michigan Senator Carl Levin released a report concluding that "speculative markets" are "partly to blame for surging oil prices that have pushed gas at the pump toward \$4 a gallon." And Senator McCain [not to mention President Bush and Governor Charlie Crist] would have us believe that the answer to high prices at the pump in June 2008 is drilling off the coast of Florida! Hey guys, it ain't a question of supply and demand; its a rigged game!

So why has interest in the "Enron Loophole" issue grown to the point where there are now more than 175,000 sites devoted to it? And, what role might it play in the 2008 presidential election?

First question first: Why has the loophole resurfaced precisely now? Why not six months or two years ago? Simple: the recent \$307 billion farm bill. When questioned, Senator McCain said he was against the bill, because "it would dole out wasteful subsidies." One McCain aide, told journalist Jason Leopold that McCain opposed the farm bill because "it rewards lobbyists" by granting rich farmers "lucrative subsidies." OK, that's reasonable. However, the same aide noted that one additional reason for his boss's opposition was a section containing "regulatory language on the energy futures market."

There's that word again . . . REGULATION!!

ARGH!!!

Who put this idea of hating any form of government regulation into the head of a man who freely admits "I don't know as much about the economy as I should?"

Why former Senator Gramm, that's who.

Gramm, who is often described as "one of McCain's closest friends in politics," is also the campaign's chief economic adviser. Anyone who has followed politics over the past twenty years will know that Phil Gramm hates government regulation and oversight even more than a Dodger fan

hates the Giants. And this is the man to whom John McCain has entrusted his economic game plan?

Let Republicans and Obama haters of all shapes and sizes decry his relationship with Jeremiah Wright. Let them question whether or not he thinks Louis Farrakhan is a stand-up guy. For my money, the two of 'em are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. To the best of my knowledge, neither has provided a platform whereby consumers could be bilked out of \$40 billion or pay more than \$4 at the pump. Neither one has paved the way for the richest one-tenth-of-one-percent to profit by human misery. All these two gasbags have done is exercise their big fat mouths.

Instead of continually wondering about Senator Barack Obama's alleged "relationship" with people whose words we may find abhorrent, we would be far wiser to question Senator John McCain's verifiable relationship with the man who made the term "Enron Loophole" such a hot term in the Google galaxy.

Move over "Whiskey Ring."

Stand aside "Teapot Dome."

The "Enron Loophole" is about to overtake you!

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June 25, 2008 in [John McCain](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

## All Politics, All The Time

July 03, 2008

### The Maggot in the Cheese

Flipping through an old album the other day, I came across two photos that brought back some pretty distressing memories: one of then-Senator Dan Quayle, standing and shaking hands with yours truly, surrounded by a bunch of well-dressed gentlemen; the other of then-Senator Jesse Helms, standing and shaking hands with still yours truly surrounded by the same bunch of well-dressed gentlemen. I'm the one in the blue blazer with a fairly dyspeptic look on his face. [Note: *Eerily, within 24 hours of posting this piece comes the announcement that Senator Helms has died.*]

The photos were taken nearly twenty-five years ago when I was an officer of something called *GOPAC* -- the **Gold Coast Political Action Committee**. The group's *raison d'être* was providing a maximum of \$5,000 in campaign funds to those members of Congress the group deemed "good and reliable friends of Israel." While on the surface this sounds both great and straightforward, there was a problem -- that which poet Edna St. Vincent Millay once called "The maggot in the cheese, the canker in the leaf." You see, we were a "single-issue" PAC. What this means is that the *only* yardstick we used to measure or evaluate the various representatives and senators was the quality of their support for Israel. For many GOPAC members Israel was the only issue that mattered.

"Back in the day," I argued long, hard and -- as it turned out, unsuccessfully -- for us to use an expanded, more diffuse measuring device: a multi-issue approach. Under this proposal, we would look at where potential recipients stood -- and how they had voted -- on ten or more critical issues *after* we had first determined that he or she was a "good and reliable friend of Israel." I remember warning the well-dressed gentlemen that "If the *only* issue by which we judge these guys is Israel, I promise you that the day will come when we find ourselves making contributions to people with whom we disagree on most everything else -- like economy, Social Security, healthcare, the environment, etc. . . ." In political jargon, what I was



arguing for was something called a "Mic-Pac," a "multiple-issue" political action committee.

I lost that battle. Hence the dyspeptic, "maggot in the cheese, canker in the leaf" grimace on my face in the two old photos.

To a great degree, many American Jews still employ this single-issue yardstick in measuring a politician's worth -- no matter whether it be the current "Disaster in Chief" or a candidate for president, the Senate or House. I can't tell you how many of my university students have informed me that "George W. Bush is the best friend Israel ever had." Whenever I've asked them to back up their statement with examples or facts -- or have asked the simple question "Do you think he's been good for America? - - I'm generally met with either silence or a harangue against Pelosi, Reid, Kennedy and Obama. In the first case -- about him being "the best friend Israel ever had" -- I presume they mean that he has essentially left the Jewish State alone to do pretty much as she wishes. Well now, if *that's* the measure of a "best friend," then I must not understand the meaning of the term. In the second case -- about W. being "good for America" -- I take the relative silence to be an indication that the person is loathe to say "yes," but can't quite bring him or herself to say "no." Perhaps they're beginning to discover their own "maggot in the cheese" or "canker in the leaf."

In the race between Senators Obama and McCain, this "single-issue vs. "multiple-issue" argument is of absolutely vital, absolutely critical importance. I firmly believe that the candidate who will ultimately be best for America -- and the world -- on a wide range of issues, will ultimately be best for Israel. Simply stated, one cannot be "best for America" and at the same time be "not good for Israel." To my way of thinking, it is counterintuitive.

To my way of thinking, there is no contest: Barack Obama is the candidate who will be "best for America," and therefore "best for Israel."

I do not address myself to the benighted souls who persist in forwarding all those emails warning that Senator Obama is a Muslim, a terrorist, or some sort of dyed-in-the-wool Marxist. These are probably the same folks who believe that Jim Morrison is alive, well, and recording under an assumed voice.

There are obviously a sizable number of people out there who wouldn't vote for Barack Obama if he were the last candidate on earth; perhaps because he's an African American, perhaps because he's a progressive Democrat. And some of them are still going out of their way to convince others of the "truths" that they "know" about the senator. Why just the other day, I received a rather large envelope from one "Ari ben Canaan" on "Rehov Irgun" in Israel. [This is obviously a made-up name: "Ari ben Canaan" was the protagonist in Leon Uris' novel *Exodus*.] Inside the envelope were nearly a dozen different articles, their assorted authors all "proving" that Senator Obama has long planned on running for president just so he can annihilate the Jewish State. In his cover letter, Mr. "ben Canaan" compared me to Julius Lowenthal, the "biggest fool on the ship of fools," and told me to "Wake up and smell the friend chicken, Schmuck!"

Alice (mom) always taught us not to argue with crazy people, so I chose not to answer him. But Mr. "ben Canaan" is merely the tip of the iceberg; there are lots of crazy people out there who just won't consider that Senator Obama, who *will* be best for America, will also be best for Israel.

I certainly understand how critically important the State of Israel is -- to the Jewish people, to America, and indeed, to freedom-loving people the world over. At the same time, I understand that many people will base their decision on who they will vote for on the single issue of Israel. But this is a dangerous trap. For what will America -- not to mention Israel -- have gained if the next President of the United States continues to support policies that have made us into a fearful nation, enriched the ineffably wealthy, caused our economy to tumble which in turn has forced millions out of their jobs, and left tens of millions without health insurance?

The answer is nothing . . . absolutely nothing.

When it comes to Israel, both Obama and McCain have shown themselves to be "good and reliable friends," no matter what the anti-Obama contingent will claim. It seems to me that the only way to avoid or forgo "The maggot in the cheese, the canker in the leaf," is to compare the two on issues of peace and economy, environment and education, labor, equality and civic pride. If we can escape the trap of "single-issue" voting, we will wind up with a president who is not only "best for America," but "best for Israel" as well. The two are inextricably bound.

To my mind, the greatest investment America can make in Israel's future is an Obama presidency.

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 10, 2008

## Pangloss for President?

All those with a good literate memory -- or a memory for good literature -- will remember Dr. Pangloss, a central character in Voltaire's satire *Candide*. Pangloss -- from the Greek *παν* (*pan*: all) and *γλῶσσα* (*glossa*: tongue) -- is young Candide's tutor. He is the self-proclaimed *métaphysico-théologo cosmolonigologie* -- an "optimistic metaphysician," who views everything through the rosier of rose-colored glasses. To the good doctor, this is "the best of all possible worlds." Pangloss may be a lovely fellow, but he is an ass nonetheless.

In the course of Voltaire's *bildungsroman*, Candide and his tutor witness a series of horrifying spectacles, including the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755. In the end, having seen and experienced so much of the world's pain and woe, Candide despairs; he both rejects and "is cured of" Pangloss' rosy optimism. The novella's conclusion is deeply enigmatic, for we the reader -- like Candide himself -- are unresolved as to which is the "next best" philosophy to accept.

Despite having his eyes opened to the "real world," Candide is unsure of precisely what he has seen, what he believes, or how to respond to it all . . .

It would seem that many Obama supporters are now caught up in the "Candide conundrum:" not knowing what they are seeing, what they believe, or how to respond to it all.

Specifically, we refer to what the media have been calling the senator's "flip-flops" and "backtracks." The press has had a field day scoring Senator Obama's "change of position" on withdrawal from Iraq. Both the blogosphere and many of his supporters are confused, disconsolate-- even apoplectic -- over his vote in favor of the FISA Act -- the very one he had previously promised to filibuster if it included retroactive immunity for the telecoms.

The senator's so-called "flip-flop" on Iraq is, to quote the Bard, "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." On July 8, the *Washington Times* posted a version of an AP article that asserted: "*On Iraq, he has gone from hard-line opposition to the war to more nuanced rhetoric that calls for a troop drawdown process that could last 16 months.*" The *Times* and other media outlets also find a "change" or "flip-flop" in the senator's contention that he will have to consult with "commanders on the ground" before making any hard and fast decisions about the precise timing of troop withdrawals. This is nothing new; Senator Obama has been saying this all along. For proof, we offer for comparison a handful of on-the-record statements Senator Obama has made during the course of the campaign:

- **Sept. 17, 2007 on NPR's *All Things Considered*:** "If commanders came to me and said, 'We are making progress in reducing violence,' and I see continual political progress taking place, then obviously that's going to be weighed . . ."
- **Nov. 1, 2007 in a *New York Times* interview:** "I want to talk to the military commanders on the ground . . . . If there is some sense of security, then that means one level of force. If you continue to have sectarian conflict, that means another . . ."
- **Mar. 2, 2008 *Washington Post* foreign policy Q&A:** "What I've been very clear about is that I will always listen to commanders on the ground, but ultimately the commander in chief sets the mission."
- **July 3, 2008 in Fargo, North Dakota:** "When I go to Iraq and have a chance to talk to some of the commanders on the ground, I'm sure I'll have more information and will continue to refine my policies."

You tell me: where are is the "flip-flop?" Where is the change in strategy or rhetoric? Truth to tell, there is none. Unfortunately though, many folks accept biased headlines and cynical, self-serving opening paragraphs as the full story. The truth is out there for all to see, read and digest . . . if only we're willing.

Senator Obama's FISA vote is another issue. Yes, he did go on record as saying he would filibuster against any bill that had retroactive immunity for the telecoms. Yes, he said this more than once. And yes, he did vote *for* the bill, unlike Senator Clinton and 27 of their Democratic colleagues. I for one am in total disagreement with the senator; he should have voted against the FISA bill. However, to the thinking of many, this is by no means a "deal-breaker." We cannot -- must not -- become Candidates who, having witnessed that which is ugly or disagreeable, lose all faith.

Again, I do not agree with Senator Obama's vote. However, I can understand it. As the Democrats' presumptive candidate, he daily traduces the treacherous chasm betwixt Scylla and Charybdis. Its the classic "lose-lose," "damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't scenario": Vote for passage of the FISA act, and many of your supporters will threaten to desert you; vote against it, then McCain and the 527s will attack you for being "weak on terror."

Yes, it was a calculated political act; one that only time will tell if it was worth the cost. But mark this well: Barack Obama is not Dr. Pangloss, and we are not Candide. Anyone who feels like the stars have been forced from their eyes, has not been seeing the real Barack Obama. For truth to tell (and I'm sorry to have to inject a healthy dollop of realism into the cauldron) Senator Barack Obama is running for President of the United States. And the only people who will ever occupy that hallowed office are politicians, not optimistic metaphysicians.

Both historically and strategically, Republicans generally run as far to the right as they dare during primaries; Democrats run as far to the left as is comfortable. And then, once general election season rolls around, both move toward the plausible middle. That's just the way things are done, like it or not.

There are several "flip-flops" on Senator McCain's "Straight Talk" record, but for some reason, these are rarely covered. It is indeed hard to find headlines or tv teasers about

McCain's change of heart on off-shore drilling and the use of ethanol (now he's for it), the Bush tax cuts (he voted against them three times, and now wants to make them permanent) or his "100 years in Iraq" balderdash. But that's politics, and only politicians get elected president.

To all those who are disheartened by Senator Obama's vote on FISA, or fear that he has "backtracked" on Iraq, please remember this: that come November, we are not casting votes for the Messiah, a paragon of virtue or a man of utter consistency. We are supposed to be voting for the candidate we believe will offer the best leadership for both America and the world.

If for you this is indeed the case, then Senator Obama wins hands down.

However, if you want to continue wearing rose-color glasses and seeking perfection, then cast your vote for Dr. Pangloss.

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July 10, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All the Time

July 17, 2008

## What If . . . ?

One of my favorite "parlor games" from years gone by was "What if . . . ?" The rules of the game were the essence of simplicity: one person would pose a "What if . . . ?" kind of question -- almost invariably historic -- then everyone would get a chance to give an answer and try convincing us that their case made the best sense.

To this day, I often find myself playing "What if . . . ?" in my own mind whenever stuck on an airplane or driving endless miles on some boring stretch of I-95. Among my favorite historic "What ifs . . . ?" are:

- What if Moses had led the Israelites to present-day Saudi Arabia instead of Israel?
- What if Napoleon had won at Waterloo?
- What if the South had won the Civil War?
- What if John Wilkes Booth's bullet had missed Abraham Lincoln?
- What if Hitler had won the Second World War? and
- What if the U.S. Supreme Court had decided in favor of Al Gore?

Then too, there are the more trivial, less earth-shattering "What ifs . . . ?"

- What if James Dean hadn't died at age 24?
- What if Sandy Koufax hadn't retired from baseball at age 30?
- What if Bill Gates had decided to stay in school?
- What if the remote control had never been invented?

So where's all this headed?

Why to our three "What ifs . . . ?" of the day:

- What if the *New Yorker* had decided *not* to run Barry Blitt's satirical cartoon?

- What if, say, National Review had run a satirical cartoon on John McCain? *and*
- What if the American public wasn't afflicted with such overwhelming political A.D.D.?

By now, seemingly everyone from Kansas to Khartoum has weighed in on what they think about Blitt's cartoon gracing the cover of this week's *New Yorker*. "Is it satiric or is it libelous?" that is the question -- posed by literally tens of thousands of editorialists, talking heads and bloggers. I for one am both upset and dispirited -- not so much by the cartoon or the question surrounding its propriety -- but by the haunting feeling that so very few will take the time to read Ryan Lizza's insightful article on Senator and Mrs. Obama that runs *inside* that *New Yorker*. If they do, they will see that Blitt's cartoon is more come-on than commentary; a ham-handed way of getting people to buy this week's issue in the first place. Viewed from that perspective, David Remnick, the *New Yorker* publisher, has succeeded beyond his wildest expectation; this week's issue is bound to sell like hotcakes.

My fear -- and the cause of my upset -- is that where the vast majority of folks will come to know the Blitt lampoon like the back of their hand, very few will have the *sitzfleisch* to read the accompanying article. Increasingly we have become a society that scans rather than reads; that favors titillation over elucidation; that more often than not gets its information from those who entertain rather than from those who educate. Indeed, if the gap between the super-rich and the rest of us is vast; that which exists between the "plugged-in" and the "logged-off" is of chasmic proportions.

Those who do take the time to read Lizza's 14,550-plus word article will be treated to a fine piece of journalism. Lizza -- one of the first serious journalists to put the presidential bug in Obama's ear -- guides readers through the step-by-step political maze by which Obama progressed from community organizer to state senator, from to failed Congressional candidate, to United States Senator, and from primary aspirant to presidential nominee. At each step along the path, we see both Obama's growth as a creature of politics as well as his undeniable ability to learn from his political mistakes. In the end, the most important lesson Lizza teaches is, perhaps, that "Superheroes don't become president; politicians do."



But back to the "What ifs . . .?"

What if, say, the conservative National Review had run a "satiric" cover on John McCain? What would it look like? What would people be complaining about? Well, the other day, the Seattle *Post-Intelligencer's* Pulitzer-prize winning political cartoonist David Horsey came up with one such example. As you can see, it shows a wheel-chair bound McCain sitting next to wife Cindy, who is dumping pills out of a bottle into her husband's hand. While Senator McCain hums "Bomb-bomb-bomb, bomb-bomb Iran" [sung to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara-Ann,"] Cindy says, "Here John, take some of my *meds* to get you through the *inaugural parade!*" Where Blitt's cartoon has a painting of Osama bin Laden on the wall, Horsey's has Dick Cheney. Where the Obama cartoon has an American flag burning in the fireplace, the McCain version has the Constitution going up in flames. There are, to be certain a couple of key differences between the two cartoons. Most obviously, Horsey's McCain caricature *hasn't* graced the cover of a national magazine, where Blitt's *has*. Second, and more importantly, where the McCain cartoon lampoons things which are *true* -- i.e., Senator McCain *is* a senior citizen and *did* once sing "Bomb-bomb-bomb . . ." -- the Obama sketch satirizes *untruths*, distortions, and misconceptions.

So "What if . . ." the American public could get over what newscaster Rachael Maddow calls our collective "Political Attention Deficit Disorder?" Well, first of all, it is highly likely that most of the "newscasters" on Fox and the talkmeisters on conservative radio would be out looking for new careers. Second, voters would begin demanding that both candidates and the media which covers them deal far more with issues, and far less with personalities. And thirdly, we might finally, finally come to understand that like it or not, only political professionals win elections. If perfection is what we're looking for or demanding in our leaders, we will be far better off renting "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

**PS:** *If great political satire is what you're after, might I recommend Jonathan Swift?*

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# **Beating the Bushes:**

**All Politics, All The Time**

**July 24, 2008**

## **It's Not Just the Technology, Stupid**

It has been nearly a half-century since President John F. Kennedy proffered one of the most audacious challenges in all human history: to land a man on the moon and bring him back safely to earth -- and all within a single decade. Imagine that: nearly a half century! Where has the time gone?

For many Americans, Kennedy's bold challenge -- and its very success -- became the gold standard for national pride and optimism. Indeed, for nearly two generations now, America's "can-do" attitude has been perhaps best expressed in that well-known construction, "Any country that can land a man on the moon can . . ."

Over the years this formula has been used almost to the point of exhaustion. At any given point in time the "Any country that can land a man on the moon can . . ." construct has been the "A-side" of such varied challenges as:

- Ending world hunger
- Eliminating poverty
- Conquering cancer, and now
- Making America energy self-sufficient

Ever since Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins reified JFK's bold vision, America -- as many would have it -- has suffered from the lack of a great national challenge; that so-called "B-side" of the "Any country that can land a man on the moon can . . ." formula. Oh yes, we've occasionally been subjected to such rhetorical devices as the "War on Terror," or the "War on Poverty," but these are not national challenges in any real sense of the term. In recent memory, the challenge has been to "go shopping," or to accept constraints and abridgements of personal freedom as a way of

safeguarding and maintaining personal freedom. *[Anyone who understands the logic of this, please get contact me ASAP.]*

This past Thursday, Vice President Al Gore issued what is easily the boldest, most audacious challenge since the days of JFK: national energy independence within ten years. In a speech to the bipartisan Alliance for Climate Protection Gore, the alliance's chair, issued a challenge to totally remake the way America generates and uses power. The Gore challenge would see the country moving to "renewable energy and truly clean, carbon-free sources" to power the nation's homes, plants and transportation. And all within a single decade!

Talk about a supreme national challenge.

Already, we can hear both "side-A" and "side-B" coalescing into that marvelous construction: "Any country that can land a man on the moon can definitely create energy independence within a decade."

Well, as the old Yiddish expression goes, *Fuhn dein moyl adztu gaht's oyren* -- "From your mouth to God's ears."

Although both Vice President Gore and his far-reaching proposal have received a lot of positive press in recent days, there are those who are questioning, lampooning and even denigrating. (*"Once again, the Goracle speaks!"*) Despite the fact that most thinking people both appreciate and understand the incredible importance of Gore's challenge, there are, nonetheless, lots of folks who think that what he's proposing is unobtainable, undoable --and not just because he's calling for it to be accomplished within the next ten years.

Sadly, these folks are probably correct -- but probably *not* for the reasons they think. The problem with the "B-side" of the equation is not -- indeed has rarely been -- within the realm of science or technology. Indeed, if the flip-side of "Any country that can send a man to the moon can . . ." was technologic or scientific, poverty, hunger and cancer -- to name but three of humanity's most pressing ills -- would have been eradicated long ago. Rather, it is precisely because the "B-side" generally resides in the realm of government, politics and economics that Gore's great challenge is going to take far, far longer than a mere ten years.

Kennedy's great challenge -- unlike Gore's -- did not require radical changes in the way the nation's signal industries did business. Neither Gemini nor Apollo required the Big-Three automakers to retool; the space program was never a threat to Exxon, Mobil or Shell; it in no way altered international commerce or our balance of payments. It is precisely because Gemini and Apollo were creatures of cutting-edge science and technology that Kennedy's challenge could be met . . . and on time.

Al Gore's challenge for energy independence is not just a question of science or technology. If it were, we could reasonably expect success within a decade. Sadly, the greatest impediments to energy independence are neither a lack of brains nor a dearth of technological know-how; rather, it is a stunning lack of will and an overabundance of shortsightedness. To wit, it's not just the technology, stupid; it's the macro-economics and geopolitics.

Oil -- and its many, many byproducts -- isn't just used for the fuel that goes into automobiles, trucks, jet airplanes or ships. From oil we get plastic and literally hundreds if not thousands or tens of thousands of products in daily use. A total shift from a petroleum-based economy to one based on solar, wind, geothermal -- and who knows, perhaps one day even *anti-matter* -- requires nothing short of a social, political and economic revolution. Its advantages are both many and obvious:

- A cleaner, healthier, more sustainable planet.
- Far, far fewer dollars going from our shores into the pockets of Middle Eastern tyrants.
- Millions of brand new jobs in brand new industries.
- A renewed sense of national purpose and optimism.

As I see things, there are a couple of major obstacles standing in the way of meeting Gore's great challenge.

First, is *industrial intransigence and shortsightedness*. Whether it is right or wrong, most corporate CEOs are far more concerned with the next quarter than with the next decade or century. American tire manufacturers, as an example, have had the ability to market tires good for 250,000 miles or more for many years. They chose not to of course, because were they to do so, customers wouldn't be purchasing tires nearly so often. Likewise the oil industry which, so long as there is black gold to be explored, drilled,

imported, refined and sold, are loathe to revamp, retool or rethink their future *modus operandi*.

A second major obstacle is what historian Rick Shenkman calls our *national stupidity*. "We the People" may well be "outraged" by high prices at the pump and "concerned" about global warming; nonetheless, we still seem to spend far more time casting blame than supporting solutions. If Al Gore's great challenge is to have a snowball's chance of success, it will require an immense investment on the part of "We the People." We will have to make our demands for renewable energy as loudly heard as has been our pique at high prices. We will have to make our desire for energy independence real through tangible acts, whether it be using far less gas, giving our precious votes only to those who, like Al Gore are up to the challenge, or above all, by coming to realize that we are as much a part of the problem as we are of the solution.

Can Al Gore's challenge be met within a decade? If technology were all that stood in our path, I think the answer would be a resounding "YES!" For, "Any country that can send a man to the moon CAN become energy independent." But it's not just the technology, stupid. Its also economics, geopolitics and, dare we say, human nature itself, that stand in the roadway.

As JFK used to say -- borrowing a page from Confucius -- "A journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step."

Al Gore has taken that step. It's now up to all of us to join him on the long trek.

It's not just the technology, stupid!

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

July 31, 2008

## Barack Obama: The Enemy of My Enemy

Barack Obama's back campaigning on American soil after his tour of Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Germany, Paris and London. Never has a mere "presumptive nominee" received so much press. Indeed, the three major news anchors went along with him. And depending on what you read or who you listened to, Senator Obama's world tour was a towering success, an embarrassing failure, or the second coming of John, Paul, George and Ringo. Obama supporters *kvelled* over his dignified mien, his ability to articulate issues and the almost nonstop adulation he received everywhere he went. "Finally, finally," his supporters cheered, "an American leader who isn't an embarrassment." Obama detractors *kvetched* about what they saw as nothing more than a brazen breach of diplomatic protocol. "How dare he," they sniffed, "strut about as if he were President of the United States? Who does he think he is?"

I had to laugh when a couple of the conservative talking heads referred to him as a "liberal elitist." Only in America could the mixed-race son of single mother who was raised by his grandparents be portrayed as an elitist, while the scion of an east-coast WASP dynasty who, like his ancestors, attended Andover, Harvard and Yale, become a "good-ole boy."

Poor John McCain was beside himself during Obama's week away, feeling the loneliness of the only kid on the block *not* invited to Disneyland. The nadir of his week came when he traveled up to New Hampshire, only to be met by a single solitary reporter. In their desperation, the McCain camp tried to turn the cameras their way, one day hinting that their guy was about to name his V.P., another questioning Senator Obama's experience, knowledge and patriotism. Try as he may though, Senator McCain just couldn't gain traction. The Obama world tour was just too overwhelming an event for anyone in the media to pay McCain much attention. What airtime they did give him wasn't especially flattering; one day he mistakenly referred to the "Afghanistan-Pakistan border," and another he claimed that "the surge" was responsible for the so-called "Sunni Awakening."

Oops!

I for one was particularly interested in how Senator Obama would come across in Israel. To my way of thinking, he "hit all the right notes"-- but with a difference: he didn't sound like a politician merely attempting to curry favor. Rather he looked, sounded and spoke like a man with a passion for justice and a clear understanding of history.

Despite this, there is still a hard-core of American-Jewish voters who continue buying in to the "Obama's a Muslim," Obama's Osama's Candidate," "Obama will sell out Israel" schools of thought. To all of them -- and the numbers are apparently shrinking -- I ask that they both remember and ponder an age-old expression:

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Where in the world does the expression come from? Well, in the Hebrew Bible [Exodus, 23:22], we find God telling the Israelites that if they fully obey, then "*v'ayavti et oyvecha v'tzarti et tzo-r'recha*," viz: "I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries." Likewise, the Chinese have a saying that goes, "It is good to strike the serpent's head with the fist of your enemy."

One living, breathing example of "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" goes back to the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. For those who remember their ancient history, the Greek city-states -- a tangled web of argumentative antagonists -- managed to put aside their differences in order to go to war against the Persians, who were their common enemy. In a sense, the various city-states had the Persians to thank for bringing them together -- if only to beat the daylighters out of their common enemy.

You may well ask: What in the world does this have to do with Barack Obama, Israel and the American-Jewish community?

The answer is both simple and direct:

To much of the Arab world, Barack Obama, far from being their "stealth candidate" is, in fact, viewed as just another American politician in thrall to the Zionists!

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Need proof? Consider the following editorial cartoons, which have recently run in various Middle Eastern publications:



This cartoon ran in *Ar-Risala* ["The Message"], a Palestinian Authority publication, on June 22, 2008. The headline translates: The Wagon [that gets you] to the White House." The quip translates, "Obama's view."



This cartoon ran in *Al-Ghad*, Jordan's only independent Arabic-language paper on June 9, 2008. It simply reads: "Obama, the American Candidate."





This cartoon ran in the Saudi paper *Al-Watan* on June 10, 2008. As one can clearly see, it is putting McCain and Obama into the same "pocket."



This example comes from [www.amin.org](http://www.amin.org) an Arabmedia website which serves as a platform for both cartoonists and columnists from all over the Arab world. This particular cartoon ran in Bahrain.



Finally, we have this example from *Al-Ittihad* ["The Union"], a United Arab Emirati Newspaper. Published on June 10, 2008, its headline reads: "Obama: 'Jerusalem should be Israel's Capital.'"

[**Note:** These and other cartoons were gleaned from the Anti-Defamation League website.]

Do the cartoons above provide conclusive proof that Barack Obama was, is, and always shall be a friend of Israel? For those who already support him, no such proof is necessary. For those who are continually suspicious, no amount of proof, I fear, will ever be enough. I can even hear some proclaiming, "Ah, it's all a conspiracy! The Muslims have banded together to make it *seem* like they're anti-Obama, just so that we'll vote for him." Oh well, some people just don't want to be confused with facts.

To me, the facts speak for themselves. Senator Obama went to Israel as a close ally, spoke there as a good friend, and returned home an even more enlightened candidate. Those who will continually challenge his credentials or demean the true excitement he brings by comparing him to Brittany Spears and Paris Hilton [!] are way off the mark. Those who truly love America -- its hopes and history, its dreams and energy indeed, its Constitution -- need only look at those who are disparaging Senator Obama in order to understand that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

- Those who would turn back the clock to the 1920s are my enemy; and so too are they the enemy of Senator Obama.
- Those who believe that the purpose of government is to protect the perquisites of the wealthy and oversee the morality of the masses are my enemy; and so too are they the enemy of Senator Obama.
- Those who look at the Middle East and see only pipelines and barrels of oil are my enemy; and so too are they the enemy of Senator Obama.

- Those who run on platforms of fear rather than hope are my enemy; and so too are they the enemy of Senator Obama.

Yes indeed, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

And from where I sit, Senator Barack Obama is our friend . . .

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July 31, 2008 in [Barack Obama](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

## All Politics, All The Time

August 07, 2008

### For [Anti-] Christ's Sake!

In a couple of days, Annie and I will be taking off for the mountains of North Carolina, where I am scheduled to give a bunch lectures in a hamlet with the delightful name "Little Switzerland." Among the lecture topics the sponsors have selected are:

- "Is God a Democrat or a Republican?"
- "But is it Good For Israel?: Jewish Voting Habits in America," and
- "The History of a Lie: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*."

This last topic has been a pet interest of mine for nearly four decades. As an undergraduate, I wrote my senior thesis on "McCarthyism and the Historic Roots of Political Paranoia." While conducting the research, I landed smack dab in the middle of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the granddaddy of all paranoid forgeries. In the more than 100 years since this mendacious travesty was first published, the wickedly anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* have been used to "prove"



or "verify" the paranoid, anti-Semitic world-

view of madmen ranging from Tsar Nicholas II and Joseph Goebbels to King Faud, Louis Farrakhan and Sheikh Ekrima Sa'id Sabri, the current Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

For those not familiar with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, it is a series of 24 essays -- or "protocols" -- purporting to be minutes of a solemn meeting held in a cemetery at the dead of midnight. At this secret gathering, representatives of each of the 12 tribes of Israel report to their "boss" (presumably the *Antichrist*) on what they have done -- both individually and collectively -- to further their goal of total world domination. Each tribe is responsible for undermining and dominating one aspect of the globe, whether it be the world's financial markets, alcohol, agriculture, manufacturing, etc. The whole thing would be laughable in the extreme were it not for the fact that:

- *The Protocols* have such an incredibly sordid history.
- So many tens -- perhaps hundreds -- of millions of people have been taken in by its base lies.
- Aspects of it are alive and well even in the United States in August 2008.

This last point may be throwing some of you for a loop, but it's actually, really, and disturbingly true. One of the major pillars propping



up the *Protocols* is the *Antichrist*, the irremediably wicked individual whom the Bible prophecies

will oppose the Christian Messiah and substitute him/herself in Christ's stead. References to the Antichrist --some overt, others subtle or oblique - can be found in the [Christian]Biblical books of, Mark, Matthew, and 2 Thessalonians, both the First and Second Epistles of John, and of course, the Book of Revelations. Additionally, many Christians see allusions to the Antichrist as well in the [Hebrew] Biblical book of Daniel.

Make no mistake about it: Biblical literalists are ever vigilant, ever watchful, ever wary of the Antichrist -- He who will blasphemously refer to himself as simply "The One." He/she, we are told, will be an individual of great charm and charisma, a powerful orator and motivator; one who will capture the rapt attention of people all over the globe. He or she will also be a creature of utter self-certainty, one devoid of even a scintilla of doubt, and a hypnotic spell-binder to boot. Nonetheless -- and this is central to the true believer -- the Antichrist will be an utter fraud, a master of malevolence., one bent on leading the world far, far astray.

And here's where things start getting really spooky . . .

Recently, the McCain campaign ran a commercial entitled "The One." To the "unenlightened," it would seem to be merely scoring Senator Obama for being both overly hubristic and wet behind the ears. Ah, but to Evangelical Christians -- those for whom the commercial is both consciously and deliberately aimed -- it has a very different message: Beware of Barack Obama because "He is *The One* . . . He is the *Antichrist*." If you don't believe me take a gander for yourself:

As you can see, the McCain spot opens with a ballsy-voiced announcer proclaiming: "It shall be known that in 2008 the world will be blessed. They will call him 'The One.'" The spot is utterly diabolic in its brilliance. It employs a combination of methods and images:

- **Wink-and-nod buzz words:** "He has anointed himself, ready to carry the burden of the world."
- **Visuals:** a glorious rainbow stretching across the heavens.
- **Dramatic gestures:** the outstretched arms of one giving their version of the "Sermon on the Mount."

Through these visual/aural weapons, the McCain brain trust is obviously attempting to convince a certain cadre of viewers that Senator Obama, far from being unsuitable because of a mere lack of qualifications or experience is, in fact, "The One" -- the Antichrist of whom the Bible has long warned the faithful to be on guard against. To an evangelical, this commercial is more than a pro-McCain, Anti-Obama spot; it is a clarion call to arms, a war-whoop for the inevitability of End Times.

The spot continues with scenes of Senator Obama speaking before vast audiences of swooning adoring acolytes, shows him to be a man without a scintilla of doubt -- just like the Antichrist! -- and then superimposes his words over an iconic clip of Charlton Heston's Moses as he -- Heston/Moses -- stretches forth his staff and parts the Sea of Reeds.

Does Senator McCain really believe that Barack Obama is the Antichrist?

Of course not.

Then does this mean that, in the words of Keith Olbermann, that "John McCain doesn't speak for the McCain campaign?"

Can't really say.

There are, however, two things we *can* say with utter certainty:

1. Senator Barack *is not* the Antichrist;
2. The "Obama is The One" ad proves that McCain isn't doing too well with the Evangelicals.

Ever since 1980, the Republican presidential candidate has captured anywhere from 60-75% of the self-proclaimed Evangelical vote. It should be noted that Bill Clinton -- the only Democrat elected president between 1980 and 2008 -- achieved a high-water mark of slightly more than 30% of the Evangelical vote in 1992. In 2004, John Kerry got barely 20% of their vote with George W. Bush capturing nearly three-quarters. The latest polls show that about one-quarter of Evangelical Christians are

intending to vote for Senator Obama, nearly half for Senator McCain, with nearly one-quarter are undecided. The last two figures do not bode well for the presumptive Republican nominee. In other words, John McCain doesn't score all that well with the Evangelical community. They just aren't all that sold on him being their kind of Christian.

Hence the "Obama as Antichrist" commercial.

But wait, there is more!

The Blogosphere is cackling with articles, op-eds and crisscross discussions on the Obama/Antichrist issue. Even Sean Hannity has entertained the notion on his radio program. Many would be amazed just how robust -- and emotionally-charged -- the discussions are. There is a very real fear -- no doubt being stoked by that which was heretofore called "The Religious Right" -- that an Obama presidency would literally open up the gates of Gehenna in order to let the Devil hold sway.

Indeed, after reading so many of these fearful diatribes, I was reminded of a pearl from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

*Quantum mortalia pectoral caecae notcis habent . . .*

Namely, "How much blind night there is in the hearts of men!"

Whoever *is* ultimately responsible for the Obama/Antichrist commercial and campaign-of-chitchat is both dangerous and incredibly divisive. They -- whoever they are -- deserve our scorn and ridicule, for they are seeking to win an election by reviving the Dark Ages. But then again, America is just about to conclude eight long, dark years of a president and an administration whose policies and pronouncements seem geared to bring about the end of the world. Indeed, the past eight years have been the antithesis of a Hebrew term Senator Obama has been known to use correctly: *tikkun olam*, "Repairing the world."

If Obama's detractors stereotype him as "The One," and refer to him as "A man without doubt," what might we conclude about a president who calls himself "The Decider," and when asked to name just one time he was in error, can't think of anything to say? You tell me, what's worse:



*entertaining* the idea of conversing with our enemies, or threatening a military action that could bring on the end of the world?

In other words, how can anyone seeking to continue some of the most dangerous of George W. Bush's policies -- like Senator McCain -- have the temerity to wonder aloud if maybe Barack Obama is the Antichrist? How can a man who wants nothing so much but to follow, ridicule a man who wants nothing so much but to lead?

So, be neither surprised nor downhearted if Senator Obama speaks more and more to the issue of faith as the campaign progresses. And be neither affrighted nor downhearted when he speaks in lofty cadences.

He is *not* the Antichrist.

What he *is* -- God willing -- is the next President of the United States.

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## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 15, 2008

### Whatever Became of Joseph?

Back in 1965, Harvard mathematics professor/topical singer-songwriter Tom Lehrer brought out his classic "That Was the Year That Was." Included among the 7 cuts on side B was a little ditty entitled "Whatever Became of Hubert?" Dedicated to then-Vice President Hubert Humphrey, "who used to be a senator," the song asked:

*Whatever became of you Hubert?*

*We miss you, so tell us please.*

*Are you sad, are you cross?*

*Are you gathering moss*

*While you wait for the boss to sneeze . . .*

*Do you dream about staging a coup*

*Hubert what happened to you?*

What Lehrer was skewering wasn't so much the then-Vice President's relative unimportance and invisibility, but rather the sad fact that a once prominent progressive had somehow become a political eunuch. Those who remember the Hubert Humphrey of the mid-1940s through early 1960s will recall that he was a fiery, fearless liberal, a man accustomed to standing on the side of the angels. But then came the election of 1964, which turned him into a political *castrati*. Indeed, it was only mere months after becoming v.p., that Lehrer would lampoon:

*Once a fiery and liberal spirit,*

*Ah, but now when he speaks he must clear it.*

*Second fiddle's a hard part, I know,*

*When they don't even give you a bow . . .*

Today, nearly 45 years later, many find themselves asking virtually the same questions, albeit with a different name:

*Joseph what happened to you?*

In this case, the query is about Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman. Now without question, there *are* several similarities between "Hubert" and "Joseph":

- Both men started out their political careers on a fairly high local level: Humphrey as mayor and Lieberman as state senator.
- Both men suffered defeats early on in their political careers: Humphrey lost a mayoral race in 1943, Lieberman a Congressional race in 1980.
- Both men carved out reliably progressive records as United States Senators.
- Both men ran for Vice President while in their fifties.

At this point, we must acknowledge two great dissimilarities:

- Humphrey did become Vice President, while Lieberman remained a senator.
- Humphrey remained a loyal Democrat -- eventually becoming the Senate's Deputy President *pro tempore* -- while Lieberman became an independent who merely caucuses with the Democrats.

Indeed, many *are* asking that provocative question, "Whatever became of you Joseph?"

Because of the fact that nearly all current items, stories, photographs or videos about Senator Lieberman usually have him standing alongside Senator John McCain, people presume that he has "gone over to the other side." Interestingly, this is not necessarily the case. In doing a bit of research, and comparing Lieberman's voting record to some of his most liberal senate colleagues, a fascinating pattern emerges: with one -- perhaps two -- notable exception[s], he is still voting like a liberal.

I can hear the catcalls: "How's that?" "Are you crazy?" "Been out in the sun too long?"

No, actually, I've got the facts to back it up.

When one compares Joseph Lieberman's votes on 12 key issues in the 109th Congress to the votes of the very liberal senators Boxer, Kennedy, Feingold, Clinton and Schumer, one finds that with the exception of a single vote -- S2766 "*A Bill expressing the sense of Congress that the president should start*

to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq in June 2006" -- Lieberman voted precisely the same as his aforementioned colleagues. Like Senators Boxer, Kennedy, Feingold *et al*, Senator Lieberman voted:

- To bar drilling in the Alaska Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
- Against limiting debate on a bill to repeal the estate tax.
- In favor of raising the minimum wage.
- Against confirming Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court.
- Against limiting debate on a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman.
- In favor of stem cell research.
- Against a bill that would make it a crime to take a minor across state lines to obtain an abortion without parental notification, and
- In favor of detainee *habeas corpus* rights.

In other words, when it comes to taxes, civil liberties, the environment and other progressive hot-button issues, the Joseph Lieberman of today is no different from the Joseph Lieberman of yesteryear. It is in the single area -- and a huge one it is indeed -- of war and peace that Lieberman diverges sharply from most -- if not a vast majority -- of his Democratic colleagues.

As they ask in Beverly Hills: *vos meinsdie?*

Obviously, this means that for Senator Lieberman, the Iraq war is THE defining issue of our time; that everything else is of secondary -- if not tertiary -- importance. This means that when it comes to choosing and casting his lot with a presidential candidate, he uses a single criterion; which candidate will best be able to execute the war along the lines which Senator Lieberman deems to be proper, fitting and in America's -- and perhaps Israel's -- best interests. In other words, it means Lieberman is not all that dissimilar from lots of otherwise progressive voters in America.

Although I certainly share Senator Lieberman's concern about our involvement in Iraq and all that it spells for America's ability to return to being a positive influence for good in the world, I cannot in any way, shape or form share his enthusiasm for Senator McCain. In the few instances when I have discovered that I am standing on a different street corner than other members of the party I call home, I always did my level best to change my party's position; I didn't go out and support the other guy's candidate.

But this is precisely what Senator Lieberman has done. Despite the fact that he has been publicly joined at the hip to Senator McCain for God knows how long, Lieberman continues to caucus with the Democrats. If not, he would lose all his accumulated senate seniority. And that would be an awful lot to lose. For in the 110th Congress, Senator Joseph Lieberman is:

- 4th on *Armed Services*,
- Chair of the *Environment and Public Works* Committee's subcommittee on *Consumer Solutions to Global Warming*, and
- Chair of the Committee on *Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*.

Joseph Lieberman's seat isn't up until 2012, at which time he will be 70 years old. Whether or not he will have to continue his political high-wire act in order to survive at the polls is anyone's guess. [*Remember, he lost the 2006 Democratic primary to Ned Lamont 52%-48%, and was only able to defeat Lamont in the general election with the help of Connecticut's Republican voters.*]

Don't get me wrong; Joseph Lieberman is a good man for whom I have a lot of admiration and personal affection. It's just that in this case, he's hitched his horses to a powerfully wrong wagon; one that will undoubtedly continue plodding along the same path it has traveled for the past eight years.

Indeed Joseph, whatever happened to you?

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 21, 2008

## Some Random Thoughts on the "Slug Out at Saddleback"

OK class, anyone who thinks John McCain won last Saturday's nationally-televised "Slug Out at Saddleback" please raise their hand . . .

Hmmm, seems to be nearly half the class.

Next question: By another show of hands, how many were actually *surprised* that Senator McCain was declared the winner by most of the media?

Well now, that's almost the *entire* class.

Last question: By a final show of hands -- and without looking around the room -- how many think the "Slug Out" actually proved something?

I'm waiting . . . No takers? Well now, isn't *that* interesting?

OK, let's analyze our findings . . .

First, while it is true that most media mavens and talking heads declared Senator McCain the "Slug Out" winner, one should ask -- as in the case of the war in Iraq -- "What is the definition of victory?" In this case, I believe, victory is best defined by the late Abbie Hoffman: "Victory is when you say you win. Just say 'We won!' then get the hell home."

I've got to believe that McCain's "victory" was as much the product of extremely low expectations as anything else. Heck, the fact that he didn't trip over his tongue by say, making Kandahar the capital of Georgia or Rastafarian an Islamic sect was reason enough for his staff and supporters to declare an overwhelming victory. In other words, if McCain's supporters were fearing that their guy would score say, "13" out of "100," then found that he'd actually come in at "17," this was cause for jubilation. It's sort of like the "under-over" odds in betting; just because one's team loses the game, doesn't necessarily mean that the bettor is going home with empty pockets.

By the same token, Senator Obama may well have been weighted down by the lodestone of extremely *high* expectations. In this case, perhaps because those in the know were expecting a perfect game, a "mere" two-hit "shutout at the Slug Out" was tantamount to losing.

Then again -- and to extend the sports imagery another sentence or two -- for John McCain, the "Slug Out" was held on his home field before a wildly enthusiastic crowd of partisans. For Senator Obama on the other hand, performing at Saddleback was akin to the Dodgers mixing it up with the Giants before a rabid meat-eating crowd at A.T. & T. Park in San Francisco -- "*rotsa ruck!*" Anyone -- and I don't care if you're Democrat, Republican, Independent, Libertarian or Martian for that matter -- anyone stepping up to the plate at Saddleback with a pro-choice, pro-stem cell research voting record already has two strikes against him with the first pitch guaranteed to be a high hard one aimed straight at your head. This was pretty much the situation for Barack Obama; he was the man expected to hit a towering, tape-measure home run despite having two strikes against him. Even if he did hit a screaming line-drive double -- which I believe he did -- it was tantamount to an out.

It should come as no surprise then that Senator McCain -- pro-life and (at least nowadays) against stem-cell research, emerged as the victor at the "Slug Out." I doubt there were all that many registered Democrats attending Saddleback Church before the "Slug Out," and likely even a few less afterward.

Then, there is the matter of style and content. Let's face it: John McCain -- whose colleagues recently voted him the "Gutsiest," "Funniest," "Hottest Tempered," and "Worst Showhorse" in the United States Senate, is a far more homespun sort of politician than Barack Obama. In comparison to McCain's folksy, all-American "Touch-of-Will-Rogers-touch-of-Audie Murphy" persona, many felt Obama to be an effete, vaguely continental amalgam of "William-Barton-Rogers-cum-Eddie-Murphy. [Note: Wm. Barton Rogers -- 1804-1882 -- was the founder of M.I.T.]

It never ceases to amaze how the son of a Kenyan father and a Kansas-raised mother can be painted as an elitist, while the son and grandson of U.S. Navy Admirals is understood to be a "down-home" sort of guy -- despite the fact that he wears \$500 shoes and has so many homes he has lost count. [[Click on the video at the bottom of this article.](#)] And then there's the "elitist" Obama's understanding that if you make over \$250,000 a year, you're rich. Compare that to "down-home" John McCain who recently opined that one had to be making "at least \$5 million a year in income" to be considered wealthy." No wonder he thinks the "economy is fundamentally sound!"

You know, there was a time -- and not so long ago -- when many Americans actually reveled in the comfortable-in-their-aristocratic-skin grace of a

Roosevelt, the hale-fellow-well-met Brahman-mien of a JFK, or the dignified elegance of a Jackie O. Today, more often than not, people say they're looking for the candidate or leader who's on their level; one with whom they can imagine hoisting a cool one with or chit-chatting in easy to understand words of one or syllables. [Annie just reminded me that while Barack Obama had a 4.0 at Harvard Law School and was president of its prestigious Law Review, John McCain graduated fifth from the bottom in his class at Annapolis; perhaps America wants to replace one aristocrat passing himself off as a hillbilly with yet another.]

Getting back to the "Slug Out at Saddleback," it was all but inevitable that while McCain would respond to Pastor Warren's questions with pithy stories, Obama would answer with challenging abstractions. That's one of the main differences between the two men. And while abstractions may a tad too difficult for some to understand, stories, tales and reminiscences can be vetted -- and proven to be stolen.

Case in point: John McCain's oft-repeated "Cross in the Dirt" story, which he told once again at Saddleback. For those in the dark, this "recollection" goes back to McCain's time at the notorious "Hanoi Hilton." As McCain has recounted on innumerable occasions, one Christmas, one of his guards made the sign of the cross in the dirt with his foot as a "sign of solidarity," thereby giving McCain an incentive to live. Great story. The problem is however, that this tale -- which McCain *did not include* in his first (1973) memoir, and didn't start telling until 1999 -- likely comes from the late Nobel Prize winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.

*[Note: I am by no means the first person to recognize or publicize this. To the best of my knowledge, the similarities were first noted back in 2005 on FreeRepublic.com, a conservative website/forum "intended for conservative users who wish to have a serious discussion about political events, conservative principles and the elimination of government corruption and abuse."]*

Despite this, the people at the "Slug Out" ate it up! Score ten for McCain!

The day after the "Slug Out at Saddleback," Pastor Warren delivered a sermon entitled "The Kind of Leadership America Needs. In it, he urged his parishioners "Don't just look at the issues, look at character. Look at the candidate and say, 'Does he live with integrity, service with humility, share with generosity, or not?'"

My answer to Pastor Warren is simple: "Yes indeed, Senator Barack Obama does all these things. He's the guy who took an Ivy League education and became a community organizer. He's the fellow who donated his time to the



poor. And we didn't need your electronic 'Slug Out at Saddleback' to come to this conclusion."

This election is not about who is closer to God or which of the two men will bring heaven closer to earth. Rather, it is a crucial election about war and peace; it is about energy, environment and economy; it is about Supreme Court nominations; it is about America's role in a quickly evolving world; it is, above all about the future, and not the past.

Please, let's demand that our presidential race return to the temporal realm where it belongs.

Class dismissed.

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August 21, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(4\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

August 28, 2008

## Are You Experienced?

History will be made in about seven hours: Barack Obama will be delivering what promises to be the speech of his life before 75,000 people at a football stadium in Denver. It may well turn out to be one of the greatest political speeches in American history. In that speech, he will outline his vision for America, and what we the people can do to help make that vision a reality.

It is both sadly and wonderfully ironic that Senator Obama's acceptance of the Democratic nomination for President of the United States comes precisely on the 45th anniversary of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The wonder within the irony is, of course, just how far the American journey has taken us within a scant 45 years. The sadness comes from with the realization that there are still many -- indeed, far too many -- who never understood or saw the need to join in on this journey.

Like so many, I have been glued to the television ever since Monday, switching back and forth between the uninterrupted coverage on C-SPAN to the mostly pro-Obama commentary on MSNBC to the lowest-common-denominator-lunacy of FOX. In watching and listening, I was struck by several disjointed facts:

- That even without yet having heard Barack Obama give his acceptance speech, the Democrats have some of the best, most riveting speakers on the planet. If I were Bush, Cheney, McCain, Romney, Giuliani *et al*, I would worry about what I'm going to say and how I'm going to say it. About the only people who could possibly do better than an oratorical lineup featuring Ted Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, President Bill Clinton and Joe Biden -- not to mention Barack Obama -- would be a team starring Demosthenes and Lord Lawrence Olivier.
- That far from taking the low road and speaking to our fears, the Democrats more often than not chose to stake out the high ground and address our aspirations.
- That after far too many years of floundering in the miasma of mediocrity, Democrats are once again making it boldly known that we *are* the party of the people.

- That it was frightfully obvious that the folks at FOX weren't watching the same convention, weren't hearing the same speeches, as the people at MSNBC, C-SPAN or PBS. How else to understand the very different conclusions they reached about the tone and tenor, the meaning, motivation -- even the efficacy -- of what was said or enacted?

OK, now it's a mere 6 hours until "the speech." Funny how fast time flies when you're writing.

Come Monday, the Republicans will begin their four-day gathering up in the Twin Cities. It begins on Monday -- which is Labor Day -- with Joe Lieberman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dick Cheney, Laura Bush and President George W. Bush addressing the thematic issue of the day: service. It ends on Thursday with John McCain's acceptance speech. Ironically, his speech has been scheduled during the opening game for the 2008 NFL season: the Redskins versus the Giants. Whether or not the Republican brain trust scheduled it this way on purpose is unknown. What is known, of course, is that McCain's "oration" will likely attract far fewer viewers than Obama's, whose speech is now 5 1/2 hours from now.

It is pretty easy to predict that the two most prominent words in the Republican script are going to be "**hero**" and "**experience**."

First, the term hero:

For months without end, the words "John McCain" and "American hero" have become virtually interchangeable. So much so that before anyone may question one of his votes, point out his latest verbal gaff, or disagree with him on a matter of policy or fact, one must first begin with the requisite: "Now understand, that John McCain is an American hero, and I really, truly appreciate all he has done for this country . . ."

Let's be clear: what John McCain went through during the 5 1/2 years as a POW is beyond imagination. That he survived is a testament to his inner drive and spirit, and perhaps just a touch of luck as well. I have met a few people in my life who, like Senator McCain, also managed to survive more than a "season in hell." Most of them came out of Nazi concentration camps. And what do we call them? "Survivors."

John McCain is a **survivor**. For that we can both marvel and feel gratitude. But to repeatedly use the term **hero** as a "get out of jail free" card is beyond me. And, to repeatedly draw the conclusion that one who manages to survive more than a half-decade's worth of torture is thereby qualified to be Commander-in-Chief -- well, that too is beyond me. Being Commander-in-Chief is far more a matter of sound judgment and taking in the "best possible

advice" than being a veteran. Remember JFK was a certified war hero, but nonetheless made some pretty bad calls as Commander-in-Chief.

Now on to **experience**. [By the way, it's now 4 1/2 hours till "the speech."]

McCain and the Republican attack machine have already been running television ads taking snippets from things Senator Hillary Clinton said during the primaries. Through judicious editing, they have her making their case: that Barack Obama lacks the requisite experience to be president. And even though President Bill Clinton made it abundantly clear in his speech last night that Barack Obama is ready to be president on day one, the Republicans will continue using the "experience, experience, experience" mantra for the next ten weeks.

But what, I ask you is "experience?" Especially when it comes to being President of the United States? Is there any combination of life experiences that will guarantee success in the Oval Office? As kid, I remember wondering how in the world one ever trained to become an Acapulco cliff diver. Did you first dive off of a diving board or ladder? What could you do to approximate all the crashing waves a hundred feet below? The truth is, very little.

Now, this is not to say that one doesn't need any experience whatsoever to become president -- although goodness knows we've had a few who were really the pits despite possessing a great resume. More than experience, one needs both character and judgment. The major character ingredients, it seems to me are an insatiable curiosity, a profound ability to listen and learn, and the wisdom to know what you do not know. Above all, one must have both the humility and self-assurance to surround oneself with those "elders" who are the experts. Its like what God told Moses: select captains of tens and captains of hundreds and captains of thousands. They will advise you -- along with the elders -- so that you can, with their assistance, make the best decisions.

As used in the world of campaign politics, "experience" is objective, while "judgment" is subjective. In the real world, the two qualities can be both.

A hypothetical: Which candidate would you vote for?

Candidate A has served in increasingly more important, more prestigious federal offices for nearly a decade. He is well-educated, well-known, and well-respected.

Candidate B served a single term in the House of Representatives a full 14 years before running for president. In the intervening time, he devoted himself to becoming one of the most successful and highest-paid attorneys in the Country.

Candidate A is charming, good looking, and has a beautiful wife.

Candidate B is angular, close to ugly, has big ears and quite frankly a homely wife.

So who would you vote for?

If you said "candidate A," you just elected the charming, good looking John Breckinridge, which means that you denied office to "candidate B," the angular, close to ugly, big eared Abraham Lincoln. (By the way, Lincoln, who by the time he became president was earning in excess of \$50,000 a year, had his clothes made by Brooks Brothers. Now that's a country yokel for 'ya!)

Experience comes in many shapes and sizes.

It's something to ponder in the 3 1/2 hours until Barack Obama gives the speech of his life.

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August 28, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 04, 2008

## **This is NOT Another Piece on Sarah Palin**

By now, I'm sure most of us have had "it up to here" with all the coverage, images and background info on America's most famous "hockey mom." It's been nothing short of amazing to see how 168 hours -- one week's -- worth of media saturation can take a virtual unknown and make her as recognizable as the star of any long-running sitcom. Yes indeed, for Governor Palin, the road that leads from anonymity and invisibility to probability and feasibility has been measured in mere millimeters.

But this is NOT another piece on Sarah Palin. It is neither my intention nor my desire to discuss the absurdity, the craven cynicism, of all those in the Republican camp who can actually stand there with a straight face and proclaim that Palin's six years as mayor of Wasilla (population c. 9,780) and 613 days as governor of Alaska (population c. 684,000) make her the best possible choice for Vice President of the United States. Or that by having spent virtually her entire life in the state closest to Russia, she is best able to deal with **Без перевода** Putin and Medvedev. Or that because as governor, she heads the Alaska National Guard, she is more qualified than anyone save, say Douglas MacArthur, to become Commander-in-chief. Or that because she took on and defeated a sitting governor from her own party that she is the second coming of Ronald Reagan. (**Note:** At the time she took on and defeated Governor Frank Murkowski in the Republican primary, Murkowski was already suffering mortal political wounds for having appointed his own daughter to the U.S. Senate and giving sweetheart deals to oil producers.)

No, this is NOT a screed about Sarah Palin. (*By the way, just the other day, Alan Wald, one of my oldest friends, reminded me that spelled without the "l," "Palin" becomes "Pain." Clever, no? But*

*what do you expect from the son of a Hollywood screenwriter?)* I can bring myself to neither rant nor rave over the fact that up until the very last moment, it was Senator McCain's intention to name Joe Lieberman as his running mate -- only to have that pick nixed by party "higher-ups." Obviously, a majority of these Republican Party "sages" believed that in anointing Governor Palin, they would be able capture a percentage of angry, disillusioned Hillary Clinton supporters, and keep evangelical voters happy to boot.

I can no more speak for fundamentalist Christians than I can for women, and for the same reason: lack of first-hand experience. However, it is my sense that in the latter case, the overwhelming majority of women who have been Clinton supporters won't buy into the tacit, un verbalized Republican contention that "one woman is as good as the next." Do Senator McCain and his handlers really, truly believe that women voters are so vapid, narrow and shallow as to place mere gender above such critical issues as choice, healthcare and the environment, to name but three? I've got to believe that an overwhelming majority of Senator Clinton's supporters can see through the "hockey-mom" facade and understand what is going on here; an invitation to vote for a women who will set the women's movement back at least a half-century.

As Annie and I were watching Governor Palin's speech last night, several things became starkly obvious:

1. That the Xcel Energy Center was nowhere near capacity.
2. That there was little racial or cultural diversity among Republican delegates.
3. That with the exception of a few paragraphs, Palin's speech was not written with specifically her in mind.
4. That Sarah Palin is June Cleaver brandishing a machete.
5. That the Republicans are going to take the least experienced vice presidential candidate of the past century and use her to make the case that the other party's presidential candidate lacks experience.
6. That the McCain-Palin ticket is going to be running as much as against the so-called "left-wing media" as they are against Obama-Biden.

7. That we bloggers are going to having a field day exposing Sarah Palin.

One might recall that in introducing Governor Palin to the nation the other day, Senator McCain referred to her as his "compatriot" in his battle against wasteful federal spending. Furthermore, he described her as a politician "with an outstanding reputation for standing up to special interests and entrenched bureaucracies . . . someone who's stopped government from wasting taxpayers' money." Well now, did someone neglect to inform Senator McCain that as Mayor of Wasilla, Palin was responsible for securing \$27 million in federal earmarks -- which works out to about \$4,030.00 for every man, woman and child in town? (*By means of comparison, Boise, Idaho, population roughly 190,000, took in slightly less than \$7 million in earmarks during the same period.*) Or that before she turned against the so-called "Bridge to Nowhere," (price tag: \$233 million) that she was steadfastly in favor of it? Or that the woman whom McCain described as being at the forefront of ecological issues favors drilling in the Alaska National Wildlife Reserve (which McCain is against) and has actually sued George W. Bush's Department of the Interior for placing Polar Bears on the "endangered species" list?

During an interview on last Sunday night's *Sixty Minutes*, Senator Obama offered what I believe to be the best and pithiest one-sentence depiction of the basic difference between Democrats and Republicans that I have heard in a long, long time, To wit: "The Republicans are good at winning elections; the Democrats are far better at governance."

Here's hoping that the American voting public -- not just the pasty faces we've seen congregated in St. Paul -- will ask themselves some hard questions. Questions like:

- Which political team spends the most time discussing the programs they envision rather than attacking the opposition?
- Which candidate stands the best chance of working with what undoubtedly will be an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress?
- What role does pure inspiration play in my vote?



- Which candidate do I want being a single heart beat from the Oval Office?

"Hey," I can hear you saying at this point. "I thought that this was NOT going to be another piece on Sarah Palin!"

Sorry, but I lied . . .

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September 04, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 11, 2008

## Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch . . .

After a second straight week of "All Palin All the Time," discussions about Hockey Moms, lipstick, and pigs, not to mention all the feigned outrage from both sides of the aisle, its time to get back to . . . gasp . . . the issues. Yes, I know, stuffy old issues aren't nearly as entertaining, but they do have their place -- like in the future of the nation. But hey, isn't it one heck of a lot more fun reading the *National Enquirer* or watching *Deal or No Deal* than shaping one's views by reading the *Nation* or watching *PBS*? As Annie reminds me, "Palin and *People* serve pretty much the same purpose: they're both distractions that keep us from what truly matters."

And so, in the spirit of "what truly matters," let's use the majority of this piece on something of -- hopefully -- greater substance and importance than whether or not Bristol -- and not Sarah -- is Trig's birth mother [Geez, sounds like something from a daytime soap, don't it? But this is precisely what's been floating around the Internet of late.]

The issue we're going to discuss here is health care; specifically what Senators McCain and Obama have proposed, and what the differences are between their respective visions.

### Health care as Envisioned by John McCain

It should come as no surprise that the McCain/Republican version of health care reform relies heavily on market forces, rather than any form of government intervention. Predictably, under a McCain administration, insurance markets would be deregulated; there would be a push for enhanced competition, and the promotion of individually purchased insurance and "less comprehensive" insurance policies.

The centerpiece of the McCain proposal represents a revolutionary change.

It has long been the case that people who are insured by their employers haven't had to pay taxes on this benefit. Under McCain's proposal, **this benefit would be now be taxed**. His number crunchers estimate that this new tax would generate approximately \$3.6 **trillion** over a ten-year period. Each individual would then receive a refundable \$2,500 tax credit (\$5,000 per family) with which they could either purchase private insurance (should they so choose) or help defray the new tax. This is great for employers, lousy for employees, and potentially catastrophic for the uninsured. [For those of us who currently pay our own freight, \$5,000 would take care of less than 5 months worth of coverage -- even with unconscionably high co-payments and deductibles.) For those who are currently uninsured -- or worse, have serious pre-existing conditions -- they would have all of \$2,500 to shop around with, which wouldn't buy one whole heck of a lot.

The McCain camp correctly argues that the current tax exclusion on benefits disproportionately benefits higher-income Americans. They argue that providing an equal credit is a far more equitable allotment of federal revenues. In theory this is true, but still, \$2,500 or \$5,000 isn't going to afford a whole heck of a lot of year-round coverage for those currently uninsured -- unless companies begin dropping their prices. But where is the incentive?

The McCain brain trust argue that by taxing workers' medical insurance benefits, it would make people more aware of just how much their employers are paying on their behalf. And your point is . . .? By deregulating the insurance industry, people --in theory -- would theoretically be able to purchase coverage across state lines. What this means is that if I find insurance to be cheaper in California than in Florida (which just happens to be true), I could then make arrangements to purchase my plan from someone in Hollywood, CA, rather than Hollywood, FL. Of course, this only works if you are pretty literate, have access to the Internet, and possess the patience of a saint. In the long run, those who are currently uninsured would likely remain so under the McCain "reform."

Then too, nowhere in this plan does it take into account the one area above all others that make coverage so incredibly high: corporate administrative costs. The McCain proposal does not address this issue, which means that a huge percentage of every dollar paid for insurance will continue going toward administrating that policy, and not health care.

By the way: if the McCain/Palin health care proposal were to be enacted, little Trig Palin wouldn't have a ghost of a chance of being covered if:

- (A) His father was not covered by his union and/or
- (B) His mother was not covered by the State of Alaska.

How lucky for Trig!

If I were to grade the McCain proposal, it would receive an overly generous **C-**.

### Health care as Envisioned by Barack Obama

Unlike the McCain "let's-tax-the-employee-benefit-and-leave-the-rest-to-the-market" plan, the Obama reform emphasizes an array of insurance options. According to Professor Jonathan Oberlander's analysis in the August 21 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Obama's plan ". . . *would provide insurance pooling and purchasing power that, along with insurance-market regulation, would effectively address the problems that Americans without group coverage encounter when trying to purchase affordable insurance on an individual basis.*"

The centerpiece of the Obama proposal is a **"play or pay"** mandate for employers. Either they "play" -- offer employees insurance -- or "pay" a tax for not providing insurance. (**Note:** this mandate exempts very small businesses.) The Obama reform envisions the creation of a new national "health exchange" for the uninsured and small businesses. It would be run similarly to Medicare, which historically has been able to keep administrative costs to somewhere around 2%.

Unlike the McCain plan, Obama's mandates that all children *must* have coverage, and offers subsidies for low-income Americans so that they can purchase coverage. Moreover, all insurance plans would be regulated to the extent they end "risk rating" based on health status -- a decided victory for those with chronic conditions. One major concern of the Obama health care plan is that it lacks a fully reliable, fully realized source of funding. Part of it would no doubt come from letting the tax cuts for families making over \$250,000 expire. A proportion would undoubtedly come from employer

assessments -- i.e. those who decide to discontinue covering their employees.

Essentially, what Obama and the Democrats have placed before the nation is a national health care *plan*, not national health care. It takes the best aspects of health care plans currently operating in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Hawaii, and grafts on to it a national exchange concept. Although far from perfect, it seems to be -- at least at this juncture -- more fully thought-out and less market-friendly than the McCain plan.

If I were to grade the Obama health care plan, it would receive a slightly pallid **B+**.

Sadly, it goes without saying that few will ever read -- let alone hear about -- either proposal. For those who want to learn more about the two proposals, you can go to either campaign's website, or read Professor Oberlander's *New England Journal of Medicine* article at

<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/359/8/781#T1>

Predictably, the McCain camp will stereotype the Obama proposal as "Socialized Medicine," whatever in the world that means. Likewise, the Obama camp will dismiss the McCain proposal as "an early Christmas present for the insurance industry," whatever *that* means. And neither one will get much further than that in the discussion.

If this shall indeed be the case, then we, the American public will not only be poorer and less informed; we will also be partly to blame. For in paying so much attention to the *National Enquirer* aspects of campaign '08; in continually peering through what one pundit (myself) calls "the dirty underwear drawer of American politics," we will have no one but ourselves to blame if the next 4 years are just as dissatisfying, maddening and corrupt as the last 8.

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September 11, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 18, 2008

## A Nation of Neros

From a blogger's point of view, these past several days have provided an embarrassment of riches. There are just so many issues, disasters and lunacies one might choose to write about. Of course one could (and likely should) choose to write on a *serious* topic or issue so as:

- The melt-down on Wall Street,
- The murderous attack on the U.S. Embassy in San'a, Yemen,
- The ongoing power struggle in Bolivia, or
- Tzipi Livni's surprisingly easy victory in yesterday's *Kadimah* Party election.

By so doing however, one denies oneself the possibility of addressing a more frivolous -- and more easily written and far more often read subject such as:

- Carly Fiorina's claim that neither McCain nor Obama have the chops to run Hewlett-Packard,
- Yesterday's "revelation" that John McCain "invented" the BlackBerry,
- Tina Fey's spot-on, eviscerating impersonation of Sara Palin, or
- Barack Obama's recent star-studded fundraiser in Beverly Hills.

So what's a humble blogger to do? What to address? How to justify honing in on "Subject A" rather than "Subject B", "C" or even "R"?

That's too many questions for this boy. Whenever I get to the point of feeling overwhelmed and not knowing what to write, I direct an almost voiceless, plaintive, one-syllable word in Annie's direction:

**"Help!"**

And that's just what I did about 20 minutes ago.

"What do you want to write about this week?" she asked.

"I really don't know," I responded.

"What are the possibilities?"

"Well, there's . . . ." I began, eventually listing about 25 or 30 possibilities.

"You know what really gets to me?" Annie said when I'd finished the litany of possibilities. *"How is it possible that with everything going so wrong, with McCain picking such a one-dimensional non-entity like Palin, with the collapse of Wall Street, with two terrible wars, with the President having a disapproval rating of 80% and on and on . . . how is it possible that Obama and Biden aren't ahead by 50 points in the polls? With all that's going on, why are so many people interested in whether or not Michelle Obama is 'angry' or repeating stupid non sequiturs as 'Obama's an elitist,' 'Obama secretly wants to destroy Israel and is heavily funded by Saudi Arabia,' or 'Just because he's a rock star doesn't make him qualified to be President?'"*

EUREKA! This week's topic.

To wit, the Neronean (*viz*: Nero-like) nature of the American public.

Yes indeed, the sad truth is that we have become a nation of Neros; a country in which a high percentage of the citizenry is more attracted to amusement, titillation and yesterday's myths than the realities of today and the necessities of tomorrow. So many of us have become convinced that what passes for *our* self-interest is best advanced and protected by those who, in truth, care mostly for *their own* self-interest. Far too many relate only to public image; is there any other way to explain how a heritage graduate of Phillips Exeter, Yale and Harvard could be perceived as a "good ole boy," while Barack Obama, who just recently paid off his college loans, could be seen as an elitist?

It is only in a "Nation of Neros" that people who are losing their homes, jobs and retirement; just plain folks who have to budget in a full tank of gas and are putting groceries on the old MasterCard; citizens who have severe reservations about the "good 'ole boy" of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue -- can still find something compelling about John McCain and Sarah Palin. It is all so diabolic as to be ingenious.

Nero -- *Nero Claudius Caesa Augustus Germanicus* -- the fifth and final Roman emperor of the Julio-Claudian line -- is best remembered for having "fiddled while Rome burned." [Note: Nero was no Kreisler, Perlman or Sherlock Holmes; he played the lyre.] According to Tacitus and other classic historians of that era Nero and his cronies were devoted to extravagance and tyranny. And as for the public, they were just beginning to evince a fondness for what the poet Juvenal would one day term *panim et circenses* -- "bread and circuses." By this, Juvenal was characterizing a citizenry that had given up its birthright of political freedom and civic duty for satisfying its immediate desires. In Nero's time, these "immediate desires" were likely more decadent than ours. Nonetheless, the parallel holds: today, far too many have traded in political liberty and civic duty for the modern "decadence" of shallow symbols, petty pleasures and peepshow glimpses at the lives of the rich and famous. We gleefully repeat the half-truths and downright lies we learn on the Internet as if they were Platonic absolutes, and have all but lost the concentration and patience [some of us call it *zitzfleisch*] that is required of "We the People."

OK, so this piece doesn't really answer Annie's question of how, with all the fumbling leadership and attendant disasters of the Bush Administration, the Presidential race can still be too close to call. Some may well conclude that it is the fault of the media -- or the Republicans, our educational system or the Trilateral Commission if one truly wants to be paranoid. Then again, perhaps there is no answer. Perhaps, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, "If all political writers, thinkers and operatives were laid end to end, they still couldn't reach a conclusion."

Ah, but there is hope out there; Nero still has a prayer of becoming Nerva -- the first of "The Five Good Emperors."

How so?

One of the things that has been sadly, sorely -- dare we say disastrously - lacking in American political discourse for more than a generation is *inspiration*. Checking our O.E.D., we find the following definition: "A breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse." The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *inspiration* thusly: "An agency,



such as a person or work of art, which moves the intellect or emotions and prompts action or invention."

I personally believe that one of the greatest gifts any leader -- or potential leader -- can bestow upon a nation is precisely that: *inspiration*. To my way of thinking this is what marks Senator Barack Obama as a once-in-a-generation leader. Through his writings, speeches and very presence, he is attempting to inspire and to elevate, to encourage and to empower us to pay heed to what Lincoln -- his fellow Illinoisian -- called "the better angels of our nature."

Let others deride him for his distinctive name, family history, where he went to school or "professorial" manner. These can in no way diminish either the charge or the challenge he makes: to take a nation of Neros, and transform it into a land of heroes.

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*Note:* "Martin," one of the people who has appended a comment to this article, mentions Thomas Frank's 2004 book, *What's the Matter With Kansas?* In it, Frank addresses the question also posed in "A Nation of Neros." Frank argues that one of the reasons why Americans have taken to voting against their own self interest is due to an artificial schism created on the part of Conservatives: "*In the backlash imagination, America is always in a state of quasi civil war; on one side the unpretentious millions of authentic Americans, on the other stand the bookish, all-powerful liberals who run the country but are contemptuous of the tastes and beliefs of the people who inhabit it.*" (p.13)

Another book one might wish to check out is Rick Shenkman's recent *Just How Stupid Are We?* In this perceptive work, Shenkman argues that we are paying less and less attention to politics at a time when obvious we should be paying more and more. He sees television as a chief culprit in the "dumbing-down" of America. We are far more susceptible to soothing myths, bumper stickers slogans, and raw emotional appeals.

September 18, 2008 in [Reflection](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

September 25, 2008

# “Pushmi-Pullyu”

Back in the day when kids spent many of their leisure hours reading -- as opposed to zooming around the Internet or building up their *Abductor Pollicis Brevis* [thumb muscles] playing games on the old Xbox -- Hugh Lofting's series of "Dr. Doolittle" novels were a primary passion. For many of the "Baby Boom" generation, the very name "Dr. Doolittle" unlocks the gates of youthful memory and causes such long-forgotten friends as Polynesia, Chee-Chee, Dab-Dab, Cheapside and Tommy Stubbins to magically reappear.

Next to Polynesia, the good doctor's English speaking parrot, my favorite creature in the Lofting menagerie was always "Pushmi-Pullyu," the two-headed antelope first introduced in *The Voyages of Dr. Doolittle*. [Note: In both the 1967 film and the more recent Eddie Murphy version, *Pushmi-Pullyu* was a llama.] The creature served as an ideal night watchman for the doctor's zoo, because, as Doolittle tells his assistant, Tommy Stubbins, "He only sleeps with one head at a time . . . the other head stays awake all night." All Doolittle devotees will also recall that whenever Pushmi-Pullyu tried to move, both its heads attempted to go in opposite directions. This of course resulted in a lot of hilarity for the reader and even more false starts and frustrations for the otherwise utile creature.

To youngsters of an earlier generation, this was all great, highly entertaining stuff. Not so for Hugh Lofting; he found it to be "a constant source of shock to me" that children became his primary readers. For it would appear that the original intention of his invention was creating a satiric look at the world through the eyes of

talking animals. Indeed, one wonders if Lofting (1886-1947) ever managed to read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*; when it was published in mid-1945, Dr. Doolittle's creator was already in the throes of his final illness.

It is tempting to believe that if Lofting -- not to mention Orwell -- were alive, well and writing today, he would add an additional element of satire to Pushmi-Pullyu's makeup; a streak of bald-faced mendacity. One can easily imagine one head saying "right," "up" or "yes," with the other simultaneously declaring "left," "down," or "no." If such were the case, if this were the modern incarnation of Pushmi-Pullyu, one could easily conclude that it was undoubtedly a take on today's Republican Party -- a "creature" that can simultaneously speak out of both sides of its mouth, with neither of them telling the truth.

In recent days, American voters -- especially those of us who are Jewish -- have been visited by this new and improved Pushmi-Pullyu on more than one occasion. The first such "visit" came just about a week ago when millions of people living in Broward and Palm Beach Counties, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, opened up their Sunday newspapers to find a DVD entitled "Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West." The DVD's lurid cover proudly proclaims that "Obsession" was the "Best Feature Film Winner" at the 2005 Liberty Film Festival. Those who go to the Liberty Film Festival website will see that they are -- in their own words -- "A forum for conservative thought in film." The site also proudly lists which of its favorite film folks are appearing on the Fox TV Network which, not surprisingly, highly endorses "Obsession."

The DVD opens with graphic shots of 9/11 and Muslims chanting "Death to America!" Coming on the heels of yet another Internet campaign to convince voters -- both Jewish and non-Jewish alike -- that Senator Obama is a Muslim, "Obsession" contains a segment called "Denial," which, in the words of the *Palm Beach Post's* Randy Schultz, "... compares the supposed failure to confront Islamic terrorists to the failure to confront Nazi Germany." In other words, Osama bin-Laden and Al-Qaeda in 2008 are Adolf Hitler and the Nazis in 1938. This is what "Pushmi" proclaims. When directly queried, "Pullyu" steadfastly denies that this DVD is directed at any single group' it is only meant to educate.

Right. And pigs are kosher.

**(Note:** *The group that underwrote "Obsession," the "Clarion Fund," is a 501(c)3 whose stated objective is " . . . helping Americans understand that the mainstream media is not adequately conveying the reality of radical Islam." The Clarion Fund website discloses neither its leadership nor its sources of funding, which is highly questionable.*)

Another Pushmi-Pullyu "visit" has come via telephone: the notorious spate of so-called "push-polls" directed specifically at Jewish voters. These "polls," claim the sponsoring Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), are solely intended to "understand why Barack Obama continues to have a problem among Jewish voters." This is "Pushmi" speaking. When accused of conducting a "push-poll" whose sole purpose is to scare the daylights out of potential Obama voters in the Jewish community "Pullyu" steadfastly denies that it is anything of the sort.

Oh really.

If it's not a push-poll, then why are they asking "How would you feel about Senator Barack Obama if you knew that:

- He has had a decade long relationship with pro-Palestinian leaders in Chicago?
- The leader of Hamas, Ahmed Yousef, expressed support for Obama and hopes for Obama's victory?
- The church Obama attended is known for its anti-Israel and anti-American remarks?
- Jimmy Carter's anti-Israel national security adviser is one of Barack Obama's foreign policy advisors?
- Barack Obama was the member of a board (sic) that funded a pro-Palestinian charitable organization? and
- Barack Obama called for holding a summit of Muslim nations, excluding Israel, if ever elected president?"

And Pullyu has the audacity to proclaim that this is not a push-poll!

Lastly, countless members of the Jewish community here in South Florida recently received a mailer from the Republican Party of Florida. It was a multi-colored tri-fold, the front of which shows John McCain

waving at everyone. The caption to the right of the photo contains a quote, all in CAPITAL LETTERS:

*THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT ISRAEL REQUIRES A U.S. ADMINISTRATION THAT DOES NOT PRESSURE IT INTO FOLLOWING A PATH THAT IT DOES NOT WANT TO TAKE AND IS COMMITTED TO STOPPING THE IRANIAN DANGER THROUGH MILITARY MEANS IF NECESSARY WILL PREFER McCain OVER OBAMA*

Underneath the quote is another from the June 5, 2008 *Jerusalem Post*, also in CAPITAL LETTERS:

*"NEXT PRESIDENT WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST."*

Nowhere does the slick flier tell us whether the first quote was also from the *Post*. In checking its website for that date, I could not find the first statement, only the second.

What really got to us about this flier was that from the way it was addressed, we could tell how (and from where) the Republican Party of Florida had gotten the address of two ardent lifelong Democrats. They had obviously purchased a mailing list from one of the Jewish philanthropic organizations we support! We have always made it a practice to make slight alterations in the way we identify ourselves to charitable organizations. For some, it is "Rabbi and Mrs.," for others "Dr. and Mrs.," and for still others, Annie uses her maiden name. From the mere fact that this pamphlet was addressed to Annie using her maiden name, we could tell precisely which group had sold their mailing list.

Shame on them!

So while "Pushmi" can claim that their sole concern is in letting us know "how much better for Israel" Senator McCain is, "Pullyu" can deny that we have been targeted in any way, shape or form.

According to the most recent polls, Senator Obama can already count on the votes of 6 out of 10 Jewish voters. Let it be our prayer that such "Pushmi-Pullyu" tactics will backfire and that this number will go ever higher. I know that Annie and I refuse to be either pushed or

pulled. We know where we stand and precisely who most closely reflects our political values and beliefs.

One of the things I always admired about Hugh Lofting as a young reader -- and even more so now that I am "almost an adult" -- was that he never underestimated the intelligence of his reading audience. He never "wrote down" to them.

This is precisely the sin of the new Republican "Pushmi-Pullyu" -- it is treating its Jewish "audience" as if it were made up of a bunch of gullible children, willing to believe everything it hears and anything it sees.

It's enough to make Hugh Lofting turn over in his grave.

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I was amazed to learn that "Pushmi-Pullyu" is the 200th article to appear on "Beating the Bushes." As the old expression goes, "Time flies when you're having fun!"

Also, for all our Jewish readers, please accept our best wishes for a *shana tova* *u'mtukah* . . . A "good and sweet New Year."

See you all in 5769!

*Kurt F. Stone*

## Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 02, 2008

### The Vice Presidential Debate: A Serio-Comedy in Two Acts

#### ACT ONE:

##### *Prolegomena*

2:00 p.m. EDT, Oct. 2, 2008

Call it a serio-comedy in the making . . . .

In about seven hours what is undoubtedly the most highly anticipated debate of this or any recent political season will get underway at Washington University in St. Louis. The prospect for a political meltdown on the part of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin or a case of raging *Dentopedeitus* -- "Acute Sticking-One's-Foot-In-One's-Mouth Disease" -- by Delaware Senator Joseph Biden -- has both pundits and political geeks salivating like Pavlov's dog. Don't be surprised if tonight's viewership winds up dwarfing the numbers who tuned in to last week's first Presidential debate.

For weeks now, commentators and armchair strategists have been predicting everything from a Biden blowout to a Palin pasting. And despite having screwed on the bravest of brave faces, Republican power brokers are holding their collective breath while reaching for the Courvoisier. It seems to have dawned on them that no amount of midnight oil burning can ever give Governor Palin the issue-oriented chops, *gravitas* or demeanor she'll need to go up against Joe Biden, a man who has spent more than half his life in the United States Senate.

Predictably, the more the public has seen and heard from Palin, the more sense Gertrude Stein's quip "There is no there there" makes. Having been unable to name a single Supreme Court decision save *Roe v. Wade* while babbling on about Vladimir Putin "invading" American air space and

managing to put six Republican talking points into a single sentence, Palin, frankly speaking, scares the living daylights out of a lot of people. The thought that this woefully inadequate, self-described "Joe Six-Pack" could be a single *embolus* away from the White House is just about the most frightening thought I've ever had. While listening to her tortured responses to Katie Couric's questions a couple of days ago, I was reminded of a sarcastic quip made by a frustrated professor at the University of California: "All I'm asking for is a simple comment, not a bloody survey course."

This by no means implies that Joe Biden is involved in a cakewalk; he certainly is not. He's going to have to carefully navigate the dangerous waters between the Scylla of bombast and Charybdis of overkill. To engage in the former is to turn viewers off; to participate in the latter makes Palin an object of sympathy. Biden will have to keep his responses succinct, and be ever mindful that he really isn't debating Sarah Palin; he's going up against John McCain. Hopefully, he'll also keep his 50,000 watt smile under control; too many ear-to-ear grins will likely seem like condescension.

As for Governor Palin, I'm just glad that I don't have to give her advice, for I'm not sure what she can -- or will -- do to hold her own against Senator Biden. The closer we get to the election, the more amazed I am that Governor Palin is still on the ticket. That John McCain would even name her to be his running mate in the first place puts a huge question mark in the path of his so-called leadership skills. Senator Biden will have to imply -- without precisely stating -- this point again and again.

We'll get back to you after the debate . . . e

**ACT TWO:**  
*Postmortem*  
**11:30 p.m. EDT, Oct. 2, 2008**

OK, we're back. Now comes the time to sift through the evening's detritus and see how Biden and Palin compared to the pre-debate expectations. For Palin, of course, the bar was so low that that it seemed all she had to do was utter a single declarative sentence in order



to be considered a success. For Biden, his task was far more difficult: to keep it short, sell Obama, attack McCain, and, to the best of his ability, ignore Sarah Palin. After watching Palin's embarrassing performance in the Couric interview, I wondered if perhaps -- just perhaps -- she had tanked it on purpose so that by doing even an average job in the vice presidential debate, she would be looked upon as some kind of genius.

Giving her her due, Governor Palin wasn't nearly as bad as I thought she would be. In the same breath however, she was even more frightening than I believed she could be. Never mind the fact that like George W., she cannot correctly pronounce the "n-u-c-l-e-a-r," or that she misidentified America's top military commander in Afghanistan. [General "McKiernan", not McClellan" leads our troops in Afghanistan. The latter, who led the Army of the Potomac, died in 1885.] Palin stuck to a rehearsed script that permitted her come off like an eerie synthesis of Ronald Reagan, John Wayne and Marlo Thomas. Where in the Couric interview she was unable to provide correct answers to the questions she *had* been asked, tonight she simply decided to give answers to questions she had *not* been asked. It was obvious that come hell or high water, she was going to stick to the script -- and "the facts" she'd been given, regardless of whatever subject may have been on the table at the time. I wouldn't be at all surprised if each wink she gave hadn't been written into the margins of the page.

From her first minute on stage when she asked Senator Biden "can I call you Joe?" to debate's end when she portrayed herself as everybody's next door neighbor [despite the fact that she and her husband are millionaires], Palin came off as far more caricature than candidate. Nowhere in the characterization was there the slightest hint that Palin and McCain are members of the same party as Bush and Cheney. Then too, no where did she indicate how or where she and McCain would differ from Bush and Cheney. On the positive side, she does possess a certain folksy charm and is clearly able to stick to a script. Yet, despite the fact that seemingly every other word of her script was "change," nowhere did she present a single issue or instance where she and her running mate would enact it. Oh yes, at one point she did declare that she wants to expand the power of the vice presidency. I've gone to bed with more comforting thoughts.

For his part, Joe Biden was . . . well, Joe Biden: smart, passionate, and relentless. Biden was on point throughout the debate, knowing the facts, understanding history, and comfortable with the challenges of the

future. His one gaffe -- if indeed one could call it that -- was when he said the mantra for the pro-oil crowd was "Drill, Drill, Drill." Palin quickly -- and churlishly -- instructed Biden that it was really "Drill Baby Drill!" Big deal.

Biden's most human moment was easily Palin's worst. In his concluding statement, the senator spoke briefly about the difficulties faced by families on Main Street. At one point he became emotional, obviously remembering the worst time of his life when his wife and daughter were killed, his two sons critically injured in an automobile accident. Almost immediately, it was Palin's turn to conclude. Amazingly, the governor was both cold and unfazed; as if all Biden had been speaking about was meat and potatoes.

So who won the debate? Not surprisingly, most Republicans will say it was Palin. However, by any true measure -- facts, knowledge and experience -- the clear winner was Biden. Without question, Palin did much better than most people believed she would. In other words, she didn't trip on her tongue. But doing better than the lowest of expectations does not a victory make. She may have "beat the spread," but did not win the debate.

Congratulations Senator Biden. You may not be as cute, perky or shapely as Governor Palin, you're just the victor and obviously ready to be Vice President of the United States.

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October 02, 2008 in [The 2008 Campaign](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(4\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# **Beating the Bushes:**

All Politics, All The Time

October 10, 2008

## *Après moi le déluge?*

Might I ask a brief favor?

Could you hang with me just a bit and see if I have this right? First consider the following points:

- Wall Street and nearly every global market worth mentioning have tanked.
- Despite the \$800+ billion bailout, Wall Street continues its precipitous decline; already, trillions of retirement account dollars have gone up in smoke.
- While most Americans are worried about buying groceries or paying the next installment on their home mortgage, the big shots of the failed A.I.G. decided to take \$440,000 of their \$85 billion payout and spend it on a retreat at the hyper-posh St. Regis Resort and Spa -- a Shangri-La that actually has rooms for visiting oligarchs' dogs and cats *starting* at \$550 a night.
- According to the National Intelligence Estimate, the situation in Afghanistan now is the worst since the U.S.-led invasion of 2001 and the country is in danger of a 'downward spiral' into violence and chaos.
- The War in Iraq continues costing American taxpayers \$10 billion a month.
- All of the above are being paid out with borrowed money.

### **AND YET**

- Sarah Palin repeatedly accuses Barack Obama of tripping the light fantastic with terrorists.
- John McCain continues misinforming voters that if elected, Barack Obama will -- without preconditions -- sit down with anyone, anywhere and at anytime.
- The McCain-Palin campaign has made sure that more Americans can identify William Ayers and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright than can name their own senators or Congressional representative.
- Barack Obama and Joseph Biden are being accused of seeking to foist Socialism on an unsuspecting American public via National Health Care.

Have I got this right? Does the second group of points make it seem like the devastating realities presented in the first group of points do not exist?

I thought so. According to what the McCain/Palin camp is saying -- over and over and over -- it would seem that the only things standing between present-day, problem-plagued America and a return to absolute Ozzie and Harriet "normalcy"

are Barack Obama, Joe Biden and the Democratic Party. By vastly expanding and turning up the volume of their negative attacks on Senator Obama, McCain/Palin are putting three obvious facts on display for the American voting public:

1. That John McCain is the ultimate cynic; a man who believes he can capture the White House by catering to what he understands is a terminally-ignorant electorate.
2. That McCain and Palin are far, far more interested in getting elected than in helping solve the nation's most pressing problems.
3. That Wall Street, corporate "fat cats" and "average" millionaires are the Republican Party's primary -- if not sole -- constituency.

With all that is going on in America and the world these days, one must, in all honesty, question the sanity of *anyone* who wants to be president. Let's face it; it's a job filled to overflowing with angst and supreme challenge, and completely devoid of privacy or a moment's rest. The pay isn't even much to speak of; heck, there are at least five baseball players I can name who make in a *single week* what the president is paid in an *entire year*. And talk about the headaches! Everything you do or say, eat, drink or wear, your every gesture is open to public scrutiny and dissection from a press that just loves to ream steam and dry-clean its leaders.

And yet, despite all of the above, McCain/Palin and Obama/Biden are going at it tooth and jowl precisely for this "right" to be reamed steamed and dry-cleaned. Ah, but there are indeed some highly significant and obvious differences between the two men, their campaigns, their messages, demeanor and vision for the future.

First and foremost, it seems clear that Barack Obama has a far more presidential mien than John McCain. Compare Obama's calming confidence to McCain's frenetic fear mongering. Contrast the Arizona's senator's impetuous, improvisational "shoot-from-the-hip" manner with his opponent's far more deliberate demeanor. Yes it is true; by comparison, Senator Obama *does* occasionally come off as more professor than politician. But let us pose this question: at this point in our history do we would prefer a president who appeals to our intellect and stresses what positive strides we can make if only we work together, or one who takes aim at our *kishkes* and warns us that if we don't elect him, America is positively doomed?

Having watched the first two presidential "debates," I have been struck by how much Senator Obama has attempted to spell out -- on issues ranging from health care, global warming and the economy to issues of war and peace -- and how much Senator McCain has relied upon the stale line "I know how to . . ." During their last encounter, Senator McCain went on and on about how he "knows" how to kill Osama bin Laden, "knows" how to solve the economic mess we currently face, and "knows" how to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Well now, if you "know" all these things, why haven't you at least told President Bush? If you had, your chances of winning the presidency would be likely be quite a bit better than they currently are.

Then too, nowhere has John McCain really explained where we're going to get the money to balance our unbelievably out-of-whack budget. This past Tuesday he did make the stark suggestion that today's workers are not going to be receiving as much in the way of Social Security as today's retirees. It would seem that McCain's economic game plan will merely be a repeat of Bush's: drag as many new taxes out of the middle class so that the upper 1% can maintain their tax cuts.

The McCain/Palin strategy -- at least this week -- revolves almost exclusively around what they understand to be their base; the hard-right, fundamentalist, "earth-is-flat" wing of the Republican Party. And unless they come up with a last-minute change of mind, they will continue running an increasingly negative campaign of lies, half-truths and the worst sort of fear. The campaign is now only permitting Governor Palin to speak before hand-picked gatherings of "mad-dog" Republicans or on Fox News, where the questions they pose are like big fat fastballs -- guaranteed to wind up in upper deck. And things are getting even nastier. Just a few days ago, the assembled masses at a Palin speech started screaming "TERRORIST! TERRORIST!" when she mentioned Senator Obama. Before that chant died down at least one member of the mob starting yelling "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" When questioned about this, both Palin and McCain claimed not to have heard it.

Right. And Sarah Palin is a Rhodes Scholar.

For the longest time now, the Republicans have been dancing to a tune played by their corporate underwriters -- far, far more than the Democrats. They -- Republicans -- have shown a haunting consistency in policies ranging from the War in Iraq to the Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit program and in such proposals as taxing health benefits and off-shore drilling. That consistency is perhaps best summed up in the Madame de Pompadour's old adage "*Après moi le déluge*" figuratively, "I don't care if there is a disaster, just so long as it comes after I'm gone . . ." Perhaps this is the greatest single demonstrative difference between Obama and McCain; that Senator Obama is willing to tell today's hard truths for the sake of creating a better, more secure tomorrow, while Senator McCain seeks only to preserve the perquisites of the few at the expense of the many.

In the campaign's final days, we can expect the mendacity, negativity and vacuity of the Republican attack to reach even lower lows. We can also expect Obama and the Democrats responding with greater and more pointed ferocity.

Let the Republican's live by the "*Après moi le déluge*" axiom; it is a philosophy totally unsuited to the times.

For those of us whose concerns extend well beyond today, let us all learn to say *En raison de nous, le futur sera lumineux*"

"Because of us, the future shall be bright. . ."

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 16, 2008

## The Re-re-re-packaging of John McCain

Back in 1969, writer Joe McGinniss published *The Selling of the President*. The book offered a then-revolutionary behind-the-scenes look at the careful choreography that went into the marketing and repackaging of presidential candidate Richard Nixon. McGinniss' thesis was simple: Nixon's handlers -- with equal measures of cynicism and *hubris* -- treated him and his race for the presidency as just another product or ad campaign. Indeed, the book's original dust jacket had Nixon's jowly countenance emblazoned on a pack of cigarettes. *The Selling* turned out to be a groundbreaking work of inestimable importance. It gave readers a ringside seat at what in retrospect was the first truly "modern" [read: unedifying] presidential race. What I find so amazing rereading the book nearly 40 year later is that two of the key actors in that 1968 "ad campaign" are still at the top of their game in 2008: Roger Ailes and Pat Buchanan. Buchanan of course, is Rachael Maddow's curmudgeonly conservative counterpart on MSNBC; Roger Ailes is president of the Fox News Channel, the home of *über* neo-cons Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity.

McGinnis hit the jackpot; *The Selling* sold. It quickly shot up to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, and made its then-26 year old author a staple of what at the time was the "late night talk show circuit." More importantly, McGinniss' work pulled back the curtain and permitted the first unobstructed view of what has become commonplace in American presidential campaigns: a witch's brew of cynicism laced with a generous dollop of hucksterism. Those who imbibe this noxious potion do so at their own risk. It's fumes can make the Purple Heart winning grandson of a Jewish immigrant look like a "latte-sipping" coward, and turn a kid from Hawaii by way of Harvard Law into the most confusing of all oxymora: an elitist homeboy.

Political junkies will quite likely recall that term of yore, "The New Nixon." Well, as they say, "The more things change, the more they remain the same." Seems like every couple of days brings forth a "New and Improved!" John

McCain. From the "Hero," "Maverick" and "Straight Shooter" who once called the Religious Right "agents of intolerance" and remembered what it was like to be the victim of torture, McCain has been packaged, repackaged and re-repackaged into someone or something that is all but unrecognizable. But that's the nature of advertising. One's product must always be changing, must always be "New and Improved!" or else begin losing market share.

I would hate to estimate how many commercials we watch or hear in an average day, week, month or year. Its got to be in the tens of thousands. Some stick with us just because we hear or see them so often. Others enter our daily speech: remember "Where is the beef?" "It's the Real Thing," and "You Deserve a Break Today"? Sometimes, the very nature of the product - Viagra, deodorant or just about any feminine hygiene product - require lots of verbal misdirection. And then, there are all those commercials that "prove" that "Nine out of ten experts agree" that Product X or Product Y is the best there is. In recent years, advertisers have even starting bringing up the name of the competition -- announcing to consumers that while "Their Product" Stinks," "Ours is Faaaantastic!"

As a result of all this commercial bombardment, some consumers have come to believe everything they see or hear while others have arrived at the point where they believe virtually nothing. Those in the latter category are of a mind that "If it's being pitched on TV (or radio or the Internet) it's got to be a lie." And who's to blame them? It's just the nature of the advertising game: cynical, hucksterish and seeking to make consumers of us all.

Ah, but we're supposed to be engaged in a serious discussion about electing a leader, not selecting toothpaste. The problem is, that ever since the days of young Joe McGinniss, our presidents -- indeed, most political leaders -- have generally been advertised in pretty much the same manner -- and often by many of the same people using the same tricks -- as Madison Avenue has been hawking most any other commercial product. And that means aiming for and bombarding the lowest common denominator, whether it be called "Middle America," "The Silent Majority," "Joe Sixpack" or, as of last night, "Joe the Plumber."

Because "products" like John McCain are constantly being repackaged; because the "sell" far more often involves exposing what's wrong with the other "product" as opposed to what it is that makes yours superior, we the "consumer" wind up believing that everybody's lying and everything stinks. If the subject were toothpaste or deodorant we could just shrug it off and say "there you go again." But this is one heck of a lot more vital; it involves the future of our country . . . indeed, the very future of the world.

On balance, the Obama campaign's "sell" of their "product" has remained remarkably consistent. Yes, they *have* run lots of so-called "negative" spots.

But most reliable polling data tend to show that the American public believes McCain to be running the nastier, more negative campaign.

Could it be that people are actually beginning to see that one "product" really is superior to the other? Could it be that the more the voting public sees or hears John McCain and Sarah Palin, the less they understand who or what they really are? I think the answer to both questions is "Yes."

I think its beginning to dawn on lots of people in the American heartland that despite what has been sold as a "lack of experience," Barack Obama is decidedly more thoughtful, more empathic, more dignified and presidential than John McCain. Or that while undoubtedly Senator Joe Biden is quite a bit more loquacious than Governor Sarah Palin, he *is* ready to become president; he has no need of a crash course in "White House 101."

For those of us who have read Senator Obama's first two books [which unlike those of John McCain, he himself wrote] we recognize that he is the same man with the same energy, vision and intellect he was 5, 10, even 15 years ago. No one has had to "repackage" him. Yes, Senator Obama -- like Senator McCain -- *is* as much a "product" as he is a politician. For better or for worse, that is the nature of the modern campaign beast.

But after so many years of "New!" "Improved!" and "Revolutionary!" isn't it nice to know that the "product" we are about to elect is one we can trust; one that won't break down as soon as the warranty expires; one that will perform just the way the advertisers said it would.

#### *A couple of brief thoughts about last night's third and final presidential debate:*

Many have written me complaining that Senator Obama didn't go on the attack last night; that he did not "shove Sarah Palin down McCain's throat," or "respond much more vigorously about those who were shouting 'kill him' at a recent Palin rally." From my point of view, this would not have been presidential. He remained above the fray, did not take the bait, and emerged the debate winner.

A rule of thumb in campaign politics is that Democrats run "as far left" as they dare in primaries, then move toward the center for the general. For Republicans it is quite the opposite: run "as far right" as you dare in the primaries, then move toward the center in the general. Senator Obama has done this to perfection. However, Senator McCain has actually been moving even farther to the right in the general. This is unprecedented, and shows that his political quiver is nearly out of arrows. All he's got left is his "neo-con" base.

As for those worrying about the "Bradley Effect," permit me to plant a seed of doubt. There is also such a thing as a "Reverse Bradley Effect," whereby folks *publicly* proclaim they are going to vote for the white candidate, and then once in the privacy of the voting



booth, vote for the black candidate. This has happened with quite a bit of regularity over the past decade in such disparate places as Louisiana, Michigan, California and believe it or not, Oklahoma.

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 23, 2008

## Whose America?

*Kurt F. Stone*

**CHRIS MATTHEWS:** "How many people, members of Congress, do you think are in that anti-American crowd you described?"

**REP. MICHELLE BACHMANN:** "I would say that the news media should do a penetrating expose and take a look. I wish the American media would take a great look at the views of the people in Congress and find out, are they pro-American or anti-American? I think the people would love to see an expose like that."

Coming as it does on the heels of Minnesota Representative Michelle Bachmann's above-referenced, nationally-televised rant on precisely who is or is not pro-American, methinks it none too terribly wise to start off a piece with a quote from Karl Marx. But heck, whoever said I was all that wise? And so, casting caution to the wind let us do precisely that.

At the beginning of Marx's 1852 work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx notes:

*"Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as **tragedy**, the second as **farce**."* [Note: On the French Revolutionary calendar "Brumaire" was the second month of the year, extending from Oct. 22 to Nov. 20.]

Now, so far as I know, neither Marx nor Hegel ever indicated how they understood or categorized history when it repeated itself for a third, fourth or even fifth time.

Banality?

Stupidity?

Lunacy?

Asininity?

## Treachery?

While Representative Bachmann's recent comments to Chris Matthews about who is and is not "pro-American" may be an example of "history repeating itself," it is by means the stuff of farce. Rather, her words, her tenor -- her very message -- are a haunting, chilling echo of America's age-old addiction to "Us-Versus-Them." Make no mistake about it: this addiction, this echoing repetition of all that is worst in the American ethos, is beyond banal; it is stupid and asinine, dangerous, and above all, treacherous.

Michelle Bachmann -- along with politicians like Governor Palin and North Carolina Representative Robin Hayes -- and conservative columnists and talk-show hosts [read: "entertainers"] like Thomas Sowell, Jonah Goldberg, Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Glen Beck and Jim Quinn to name but a few -- are merely the latest incarnation of such damnable demagogues as:

- **Rep. Lewis Charles Levin**, Founder of the 1840s super-patriotic "Know Nothing Party," who proclaimed that all of America's problems were due to the Irish;
- **A. Mitchell Palmer**, Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General and scourge of anarchists everywhere, who saw a "Red under every bed;"
- **Rep. Martin Dies**, First chairman of HUAC, who believed that the Jews of Hollywood were leading America down the Red-hued path to Perdition,
- **Sen. Joe McCarthy** -- Need one say more? and
- **Sen. John Stennis**, The man who "revealed" the dangerous link between the long haired students of Berkeley and the loathsome slave masters of Beijing.

Each and every one of these would-be demagogues sought to drive a stake through the heart of America, dividing it between "Us" and "Them." Each found startlingly simple "black-and-white" answers to a series of highly complex problems and challenges. Each ultimately led a movement whose adherents were far more interested in pointing a finger of blame than in extending a hand of help.

One again, history is repeating itself. This time around, Ralph Cramden has been replaced by "Joe the Plumber" as the personification of a "real American," while "the enemy" -- those who are, in Rep. Bachmann's obnoxious phrase "anti-American" -- are personified by the likes of William Ayers, Jeremiah Wright, Senator Obama, Speaker Pelosi and who knows, perhaps even the disinterred bones of Sir Charles Chaplin.

And you thought the Blacklist died with Joe McCarthy!

As the days leading to the presidential campaign dwindle, we have seen a powerful surge amongst those seeking to highlight the "two Americas." The first is a wholesome "real America" where patriotic people work hard, hate taxes, believe

that leaving business alone is good, want government to stay the heck out of their lives -- except when it comes to abortion, stem-cell research and same-sex unions -- and believe in God. In many cases, they want to turn back the clock to a time when women were second-class, unions were illegal, and the "under-classes" knew their place.

Then there is the festering "anti-America." According to this skewed vision, "anti-America" is composed of ultra-Leftists, Liberals and Socialists; traitors who do not believe in God, want to raise taxes, "spread the wealth," nationalize health care and give aid and comfort to all the enemies of freedom.

Of late, those addicted to this two-America *weltanschauung* have become ever more vocal and loopy. Consider:

- On October 22, columnist Thomas Sowell compared Barack Obama to Hitler, Mao, Jim Jones and all those leaders who rose to power on a message of "change" or due to "inspiring rhetoric and a confident style" more than "specifics."
- On his October 21 broadcast, commentator Jim Quinn waxed nostalgically that "Originally, if you didn't own land, you didn't vote, and there was a good reason for it: because those without property will always vote away the property of other people unto themselves, and that's the beginning of the end."
- On his October 20 broadcast, Michael Savage, speaking about Gen. Colin Powell's endorsement of Senator Obama declared: "The only people who don't seem to vote based on race are white people of European origin."
- During an October 22 campaign appearance in North Carolina, Governor Sarah Palin spoke of "the real America . . . the hardworking, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this country . . . a place where we find kindness and the goodness and the courage of everyday Americans."
- During an October 18 campaign rally, North Carolina Representative Robin Hayes told the crowd that "liberals hate real Americans that work and accomplish and achieve and believe in God."

This sort of talk -- especially when coupled with Representative Bachmann's comments with which we began -- should scare the living daylights out of us. It should also make us angry, which in turn must make us motivated, energized and resolute. No one -- and we mean "no one" will ever divide us. No one has that right, try as they may.

The name of this country is the **UNITED** States of America. More than a name, or a haphazard collection of letters, it is a promise, a vision, a goal. And yes, some Americans *have* been here longer than others. Some have greater material wealth than others. Then again, some are taller, skinnier, better educated, more coordinated or funnier than others. But we are still the **UNITED** States of America; the most incredible salad bowl the world has ever known.

Once again, there is a wind blowing across the land that seeks to divide us, to convince one part of the people that they are more deserving, more moral, more "American" than others. This goes against every inch of progress we have made together as a **UNITED** States of America. As Woody Guthrie famously wrote, "This land was made for you and me."

This is *not* a partisan political issue. It *does* go to the very heart of who we are, and what we were created to be -- an amalgam of disparate people who together can and will be a City on a Hill . . . a beacon of light in an increasingly dusky universe.

Are you listening Representative Bachmann?

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October 23, 2008 in [The American Scene . . .](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

October 31, 2008

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Could it be true?

Could *what* be true?

Could there only be 120-or-so hours until the final ballots are cast in Hawaii and the 2008 election finally, finally comes to an end?

The answer is "yes?"

Amazing!

What's amazing?

What's amazing? Well, just think about it: It's taken more than 2 years and \$2.4 billion to get to this point. It's been so long that the names of some of the original cast members are both gone and forgotten; who but a political junkie will remember when Gravel, Kucinich, Richardson, Edwards, Dodd, Biden and Clinton were all in the Democratic hunt? Or how about Romney, Huckabee, Brownback, Gilmore, Thompson, Tancredo and Cox?

Cox? Who in the heck is -- or was -- "Cox"?

John H. Cox was -- and is -- a Chicago-area attorney. Believe it or not, he was the first Republican to announce his candidacy. Likewise, he was the first to leave the race.

It's been an amazing couple of years. Right from the outset there was the understanding that the 2008 presidential election would be unlike any other; that it was rife with the chance of a historic first. After all, there was the possibility that January 2009 might see the inauguration of a president who was:

- An African American
- A Mormon
- A Hispanic
- A woman

- A Baptist Preacher
- Older than any other first-term chief executive

When all the winnowing was completed, we wound up with two major-party candidates who represented a whole bunch of historic firsts and oddities as well:

- First African American to run for president.
- First presidential candidate to be educated -- if but in tiny part -- in a Muslim country.
- First-ever presidential race between two sitting United States Senators
- Largest age gap between two candidates [John McCain is 25 years older than Barack Obama.]
- First time one candidate is easily old enough to be the other candidate's father.
- First time a presidential candidate is young enough to be his running-mate's son [Joe Biden is 19 years older than Barack Obama.]
- First time a vice presidential candidate is young enough to be her running-mate's daughter or even granddaughter [John McCain is 36 years older than Sarah Palin.]
- First time that any nominee -- let alone both -- has an attachment to either Hawaii or Alaska.

Has this been the dirtiest, least edifying presidential election in American history? Likely not. As a rule, American presidential jousts always have been rather long on bombast, bunk and entertainment, and woefully short on character truth and good taste. And whether it be William Henry Harrison's 1840 campaign where he provided endless casks of bourbon for thirsty voters, James G. Blaine's 1884 campaign where he accused opponent Grover Cleveland of having fathered an illegitimate child ["Ma Ma, Where's my Pa, Gone to the White House. Ha Ha Ha!"] or LBJ's notorious 1964 commercial that scared three-quarters of America into believing that Barry Goldwater was just itching to "drop the bomb," there's nothing new under the sun. Oh, sometimes the lies are a bit more obvious, a tad more frenzied, such as those claiming that Senator Obama is joined at the hip with Osama bin Laden, a second cousin to Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga, or bankrolled by Al Qaeda. All things considered, the Obama campaign has been mostly restrained; Joe Biden has rarely played it as viscerally as Sara Palin.

Without question, this has by far been the most expensive presidential race in American history -- roughly \$2.4 billion, as noted above. It has also seen one campaign underwritten by an amazing 3,000,000-plus contributors who combined, managed to pour in nearly three-quarters-of-a-billion-dollars. To my way of thinking, this is the very definition of "public financing."

So, whichever ticket wins, it will be breaking new ground. But well beyond the anomalies and trivialities of this about-to-be-concluded race, are the most daunting challenges any administration has ever encountered. To the best of my knowledge, none of America's great economic meltdowns -- including the "Panic of 1837" and "The Crash" of 1929 -- occurred during a time when America was at war. Never before has a president entered the White House saddled with a multi-trillion dollar debt or such a vast disparity between the "haves" and "have-nots." [For a stark example of this, check out the photos of the house of a McCain/Palin versus an Obama/Biden supporter on the front page of today's *New York Times*.] And never before have the American people been so divided in their feelings, responses and understanding of the two major candidates.

In traveling and speaking, conversing and communicating with people from all over the country -- and even abroad -- it's become painfully obvious that few people are vanilla when it comes to the candidates -- particularly Obama or *Palin*. People either love them and think they're the second coming, or revile them and pray they just crawl back under the rocks whence they came. Increasingly, these conversations, arguments and debates point to an interesting phenomenon: a large majority of Democrats who speak positively about an Obama presidency versus an even larger majority of Republicans who seem to be much more anti-Obama/Biden than pro-McCain/Palin.

Barack Obama is neither the messiah nor the anti-Christ. What he is, is a highly gifted, highly thoughtful, supremely confident politician who has been breaking barriers all his life.

Likewise, John McCain is neither the second coming of Audie Murphey nor a senile old coot. What *he* is is an anomaly; a career military man who, despite his background and training, marches to his own drummer and has shown himself to be capable of self-deprecation.

In short, neither man is as ideal as his biggest fans firmly believe, nor as diabolical as his worst enemies proclaim.

So, where do we go from here? Regardless of who is proclaimed victor -- whenever that will come is anybody's guess -- that man will face tasks and challenges which require the intellect of Jefferson, the political instincts of Lincoln, and the teamwork of FDR's New Dealers. And do remember, all those "promises" and "positions" that the campaigns have been proclaiming these past many months represent political ideals; of what either candidate would do in a perfect world where neither Congress, the Court nor the Citizens have a say. But of course, there is a Congress, there are Courts, and we, the citizens do have a say. To accomplish anything of importance requires far, far more than mere wishing, hoping or pontificating.



Do remember that which ever man becomes president he will require a public that is made up of citizens who, after so many years in the political wilderness, can hear that most American of all exhortations:

'WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER!'

Will we be true . . . ?

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October 31, 2008 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 06, 2008

## A Letter to Thomas Jefferson

Dear Mr. President:

It's been almost 36 hours since the announcement that Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election, and that come January, he and his family will be moving into your old home on what we now call Pennsylvania Avenue.

Amidst all the joyful tears, bear-hugs and "high-fives" of the past day-and-a-half, the thought came to me: that no one had taken the time to inform you of -- let alone thank you for -- this incredible, epochal event. (*"What in the name of Poor Richard's Almanac is a high five?"* I can hear you asking. Just ask to be introduced to a fellow named Walter Payton, and he'll be able to clue you in . . .)

So why am I writing you, instead of Abraham Lincoln? Well, to be perfectly honest, I had given it some thought, but Tom Friedman got there first, which is just as well, because I've always felt a lot closer to you than to Mr. Lincoln. Precisely why this is I cannot say with anything approaching pinpoint accuracy. However, I can tell you that for as long as I can remember, there's been a foot-high marble bust of you sitting on the corner of my desk, and that over the years I've started out almost every writing session staring at your likeness. I don't know, I just have an affinity for people of keen intellect who have the capacity to teach, to inspire and to uplift.

Which brings us to President Elect Barack Obama. Mr. President, you would be so impressed with him. Like you, he is a highly-educated man of ideas and ideals. Like you, he expresses those ideals with both clarity and eloquence, although he is a far, far better speaker than you ever were. Like you Mr. President, Barack Obama is a man of great passion. Like you, he has been mercilessly attacked on the so-called "issue of religion. In your case, it was Mr. Adams who repeatedly accused you of being "a howling atheist," and threatened that should you be elected, that you would "confiscate and burn all the Bibles in America, tear down all the churches and put an end to the institution of marriage." In Senator Obama's case, a group we call the "Right-wing Punditocracy" has continually charged him with being both a foreign-born Muslim, of "palling around with terrorists," and of being "part of an extremist liberal fringe," all of which are really bad accusations in our day and age. I am

happy to report that he responded in much the same way as you; with both eloquence and passion. I well remember how you categorized these attacks: "They neither pick my pocket nor break my leg!" To a great extent, that has been Senator Obama's response -- though not in the same words. (By the way, if you wish to find out what the "Right-wing Punditocracy" is all about, ask to meet Tim Russert. He moved into your neighborhood four months ago.)

Oh yes, as you will find out -- if you do not already know -- Barack Obama is what today we call an "African American."

Does this shock or depress you?

I rather doubt it.

Oh, I can already hear the words of disapprobation that will come my way from having written you, and not President Lincoln. "It was Lincoln who freed the slaves!" they'll protest, "Not Jefferson. *He* was a slave-owner!" "And besides," they'll no doubt add, "Jefferson's a Virginian; both Lincoln and Obama are from Illinois!"

OK, I'll freely admit that there's a wondrous bit of historic irony in the fact that he who signed the Emancipation Proclamation and he who would eventually become both the symbol and fact of its ultimate fulfillment, came from the same state. History certainly does work in mysterious ways; like both you and President Adams dying on July 4, 1826 -- fifty years to the day of your greatest joint triumph. And I certainly do know that you were a slave owner. But I also know that it was never something you relished, that you made provision to free them all before you died, and that it is ridiculous to expect an 18th century southern aristocrat to live, think or behave like an enlightened 20th-21st century liberal.

Mr. President, you should be so proud of "We the People." You see, prior to this historic election, our leaders had spent the better part of a decade appealing to that which was greediest and most bigoted in the American psyche. Throughout this prolonged and stormy night, much of our polity became privatized; citizenship morphed into consumerism; our leaders addressed our fears far more often than our hopes or dreams. We saw basic civil liberties eviscerated; privacy, we were told, was a stumbling block in the path of national security; *habeas corpus* as just some dusty old Latin phrase devoid of meaning. (By the way, if you don't understand what "morphed" means, ask to speak to Michael Crichton; he just arrived in the afterlife yesterday.)

Then along came Barack Obama; a man with an utterly unique background, a finely-honed presidential mien and that most American of all messages: "If we work together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish." Unlike any politician of the past half-century, Mr. President, Senator Obama actually appealed to our

higher angels, not our basest fears. He did not claim to have all the solutions - a quick fix for every crisis or challenge. Unlike his recent predecessors, he did not ask us to just go shopping and leave the rest to him and his advisors. He actually acknowledged and paid heed to the awesome power of We the People. And for that, Mr. President, he has you to thank. For you -- above all your founding colleagues -- were the one who most firmly grasped and then articulated the concept of an enlightened citizenry. Most blessedly -- some would say amazingly -- we understood both the passion of the man and the power of his message. And we elected him, by what today passes for an overwhelming majority.

I have to believe that as President, Barack Obama will show the world an American face that is at once startlingly new and comfortably old. For he *is* the United States of America; a unique, fortuitous blending of color and culture, of intellect and ideal. Unlike our outgoing president, he is a man who is obviously comfortable in his own skin. For him, there is no need pretending to be that which he is not. And while he may not be the man others would choose to have a beer with, I for one would be honored to discuss theology or shoot a few hoops with him.

In short Mr. President, you should be so proud of the America you created and of the people your creation spawned. We have finally shown ourselves to be worthy of the efforts and struggles, the dreams and visions of people like yourself, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln, to name but a three.

In closing, could you do both of us a favor? When you get a chance, could you please, please share the joyous news with a handful of my favorite people? For they, like you, deserve to bask in the warm glow of this supreme accomplishment, of this new beginning.

Please, if you can, deliver the news to:

Frederick Douglas, W.E.B. Debois, Eleanor Roosevelt, Dr. Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Kivie Kaplan, John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Jacob Javits and Paul Wellstone.

Just tell them that there is a new/old American cheer going round that proclaims,

"Yes we can!"

"Si se puede!"

"Oui, nous pouvons!"

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Many thanks to you Mr. President. And please give my warm regards to Mrs. J. and Patsy.

Your most ardent and thankful admirer,

*KFS* □□□  
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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 14, 2008

## How Do YOU Spell "Interregnum?"

Now that the "dog-days" of autumn have given way to the "lame ducks" of winter, one might logically be hoping for an *interregnum*; a brief respite between that which is soon to end and that which will soon begin. Goodness knows the American public needs it; a "time out," a release from the intense partisanship of the past year when one side said all sorts of nasty, untruthful things about the other. If we actually did have this interregnum, we could get back to the discovery of what we have in common, and jettison all that which has been keeping us apart. And, during these days of woeful economic news, we could certainly all use a bit of what Jefferson called "skeptical optimism."

Historically many countries, many cultures *did* observe such a period between the end of one reign or rule and the beginning of another. And yet, even before the new ruler acceded to the pulpit, dais or throne, his subjects would have already pledged their wholehearted support. For the French, it was summed up in that wonderful, slightly archaic phrase *Le Roi est mort, vive le roi!* -- "The King is dead, long live the King!" Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way in America. Oh sure, we do have relatively smooth transitions from one administration to the next for which we should feel a legitimate sense of pride. And despite just how much change and dislocation, how much

planning, hiring and moving is involved in a change of administrations, it generally appears to come off without a hitch.

That's the surface appearance of transition; a delightful interregnum that is all handshakes and warm smiles.

But of course, just a matter of inches beyond the horizon there is a very different reality.

Despite the fact that our national election ended less than a fortnight ago, and that we have more than nine weeks until President Elect Obama takes the oath of office, the interregnum is dead and buried. It didn't even last twenty-four hours. Indeed, the Republicans and their allies are already sizing up candidates for 2012, already launching frontal assaults on a president, an administration and a vast coterie of allies that have yet to take over the reins of authority. To listen to most of America's talking heads, one would presume that Communism has come to America; that churches will all soon be shuttered, and Bibles burned; that guns will be confiscated and that this nation's most bloodthirsty enemies will be taking over Capitol Hill.

In the first week since the election talking heads have been blathering on incessantly about "The Obama Recession," forthrightly proclaiming (!) that our economic woes began -- and have been caused by -- Obama's election.

In the first week since the election, sales of handguns and both semi- and fully- automatic weapons are breaking all-time records. It is reported that gun shops in many "red states" like Texas, Oklahoma and Alabama have a backlog of orders for new AK-47s -- at \$1,000.00 a pop. "Folks are coming in to buy as many weapons as they can," one gun shop owner told a reporter from the *Washington Post*, "before Obama takes all our guns away from us." Other gun owners say they arming themselves against the possibility of future race riots.

Where in the world did they get the idea that as President, Barack Obama will be confiscating handguns or that there are race riots on the horizon?

From talk radio, that's where.

Not only that; many of the talking heads, have continued beating the drums of fear and derision; the campaign against Barack Obama and the so-called "left" has never ended.

There is no interregnum.

Their targets -- those whom they proclaim to be the true enemies of freedom, the malevolent dispensers of immorality -- include Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, women, minorities, immigrants, gays, lesbians and all those they choose to call "liberals." What all of this adds up to is the beginning of both the 2010 off-year election and the 2012 presidential contest.

Need proof? Read the following at your own risk:

*Note: For what follows, I thank Eric Alterman and Media Matters for America, who have done the lion's share of the research . . .*

**Talkshow Host G. Gordon Liddy:**

- *"Pennsylvania has been described as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, with Alabama in the middle. Obama is counting on the urban elites and the welfare class to win the state for him. But he's putting on a show for the rest of Pennsylvania." (10/30/08).*
- *"[T]he problem that I have is with people who come here and instead of wanting to become Americans, you know, fly the American flag, learn English, and so forth, they want to fly the Mexican flag, they want to speak Spanish, you know, and other varieties of illegal alien . . . . They want to reconquer America, like they say." (6/5/08)*

**Talkshow Host Michael Savage:**



- *"We need to get our troops out of Iraq and put them on the streets of America to protect us from the scourge of illegal immigrants who are running rampant across America, killing our police for sport, raping, murdering like a scythe across America while the liberal psychos are telling us they come here to work."* (8/4/08)
- *"Why should we care about homosexuals trying to destroy families through the mock marriages that they perform in order to mock God, the church, the family, children, the fetus, the DNA of the human species? Why should we care about it while we have a financial meltdown? Because the spiritual side of the downturn on Wall Street is directly related to the moral downturn in the United States of America."* (10/1/08)

#### **Talkshow Host Mark Levin:**

- *Speaking of television satirist/comedian John Stewart (nee Liebowitz): "I'm really tired of these phony intellectuals . . . arrogantly looking down their sizable noses at our armed forces . . ."* (7/18/08).

#### **Commentator Ann Coulter:**

- *If we took away women's right to vote, we'd never have to worry about another Democratic president."* (6/16/08, Newsradio 850).

#### **Talkshow host Lee Rogers:**

- *"The female leadership of the Democratic Party" is made up of "ugly skanks . . . Sarah Palin's good-looking and they hate that . . . I think we have to ask: Would you like Sarah Palin better if she got pregnant again and did have an abortion, because its obvious, with a lot of liberal women, killing babies is the main priority they have."* (KSFO, 9/17/08).

#### **Talkshow host Bill Cunningham:**

- *Speaking of Barack Obama's childhood: "[I]magine at the age of 1 or 2 seeing your father for the last time. See, his father was a typical black father who, right after giving birth, left the baby. That's what black fathers do. They simply leave."* (10/28/08)

**Talkshow host Neal Boortz:**

- "[W]hy is it that the people who are being affected by the floods in Iowa and the upper Midwest, why is it that they seem to be so much more capable of taking care of themselves and handling this disaster than were the people of Katrina in New Orleans? . . . think the answer's pretty clear, is that up there in that part of the country, you find a great deal of self-sufficiency. Down there in New Orleans, it was basically a parasite class totally dependent on government for their existence." Boortz described this as being a "cultural issue, not a racial issue." (6/19/08, Cox Radio)
- "I am fed up with this conventional wisdom that Katrina and the disaster that followed was George Bush's fault. It was not. The primary blame goes on the worthless parasites who lived in New Orleans who you -- couldn't even wipe themselves, let alone get out of the way of the water when that levee broke." (1/30/08)

And on and on and on.

I'm sure you get the picture. Even before the election has been certified, battle lines are being drawn, "enemies of decency," "enemies of American values" are being lined and pointed at with accusatory fingers. And for what?

Keeping ratings high?

Keeping all those who voted for McCain/Palin and the Republicans in a state of perpetual anger, stupefaction and fear?

Your guess is as good as mine . . . perhaps better.

All I know is that I am personally celebrating a brief interregnum. And for at least the next couple of months, I will be repeating over and over those classic words of Ovid:

*Quicquid erit, melius quam nunc erit*

Namely, "Whatever comes will be better than what is . . ."

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*Can you help me?* In a couple of weeks, the name of this Blog, "Beating the Bushes," will -- most thankfully -- become an anachronism. I am seeking a new name. Among the suggestions I have already received are:

- “The K.F. Stone Weekly”
- “The Stone Weekly”
- “The Weekly Stone”
- “Everybody Must Get Stoned!”

If you have a suggestion, could you please drop me a line? You can reach me at [kfstone@bellsouth.net](mailto:kfstone@bellsouth.net)

Thanks!

November 14, 2008 in [On the Media](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(15\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# *Beating the Bushes:*

*All Politics, All The Time*

November 21, 2008

## **“Clash of the Titans”**

"A politician," Carl Sandburg once noted, "should have three hats. One for throwing into the ring, one for talking through, and one for pulling rabbits out of if elected."

What interests us here are the second and third hats.

Considering that today, few men or women wear hats and even fewer know the difference between say, a Fedora, a Derby, a Gatsby or a Trilby, perhaps the great Chicago poet's quip *is* a bit stale. Nonetheless, dated or not, it still offers up more than a glint of truth. For campaign promises are by their very nature hard to keep; and not merely because those making the promises may well be lying or pandering to the public. Rather, promises and planks -- even when made by that most *rara* of all *aves*, the honest politician -- are perhaps best understood as glimpses of the candidate's more idealistic profile; of what he or she would do in an ideal political world -- one devoid of lobbyists, legislators, committees, mark-ups or compromises.

During the recently concluded campaign, Barack Obama clearly told the American public what *he* would do in that ideal political world:

- Enact national -- if not universal -- health care.
- Significantly reduce America's dependence on foreign oil.
- Cut taxes for the vast majority of Americans.
- Bring the war in Iraq to an honorable conclusion.
- Make America a leader -- not a follower -- in the war on global warming.

In order for the Obama Administration to have even a ghost of a chance for any of these idealistic promises to be enacted, it will need to have like-minded allies occupying the most powerful positions in Congress. Interestingly, a clear majority of those promises must go through the same

committee in the House: Energy and Commerce. Well, as of late yesterday, that committee's gavel was placed in the hands of California Representative Henry Waxman -- a man who although easily a head-and-a-half shorter than Barack Obama can comfortably look his new president right in the eye. Moreover, in this "Clash of the Titans," Waxman's narrow 137-122 secret ballot victory over outgoing committee chair John Dingell, Jr. of Michigan is viewed by many as a clear win for the incoming president and a defeat for the automobile industry.

Make no mistake about it: House Energy and Commerce is the granddaddy of all committees; it has perhaps the broadest, most important mandate of any panel in the House. Its areas of primary interest include global warming, alternate fuels and health insurance. In selecting Waxman over Dingell, the Democratic Caucus has shown itself both willing and able to take a new, greener path. Waxman's victory -- which makes him the fourth most powerful member of Congress -- is also noteworthy because he successfully defeated the man who has the second longest House tenure of anyone in American history. (The late Jamie Whitten of Mississippi served 53 years, 60 days; Dingell will overtake him in mid-2009.)

On March 3, 1933, John David Dingell, Sr. (1894-1955) was elected to the House from a Detroit district. One of his era's most productive urban liberals, he would be reelected 11 times and die in office on September 19, 1955. Less than two months after his death, his son John David Dingell, Jr. would be elected to take over the remaining portion of his term; he has been in the House ever since. In other words, for the past three-quarters of a century, Michigan's 15 district has been represented by two men both named John Dingell. No one in American history has ever spent more years on Capitol Hill than John Dingell, Jr. Indeed, the younger Dingell -- he is now 82 years old -- has been there for 70 years; he started serving as a congressional page back in 1938.

During his 53 years in the House, Dingell has been both a highly successful legislator and a powerful committee chair. From 1981-1995 and again from 2006-2008, he chaired the House Energy and Commerce Committee. He oversaw the breakup of A.T. & T. and the sale of Conrail, cosponsored (along with Henry Waxman) the 1990 Clean Air Act, and pushed harder than anyone for national health insurance. (Once, when asked what a desirable health care system might look like, he replied, "Canada's, right across the river.")

But Dingell has also understandably been a strong advocate for the auto industry, which has often put him at odds with environmentalists and those concerned with auto emission standards, global warming and those who favor alternative fuels.

Enter Henry Waxman.

First elected to the House in 1974 from what we Angelinos call "The Westside," Waxman has been a highly successful legislator in areas as diverse as clean air and water, Medicare for the poor and AIDS research. But it is as an investigator that Henry Waxman has made his greatest mark. Over the course of his nearly 35-year career in the House, Waxman has presided over investigations of the tobacco industry (which he accused of adding nicotine and other substances to cigarettes and then lying about it in their testimony), the Bush Administration's Medicare prescription drug bill (which he predicted would be a windfall for the pharmaceutical industry) and waste in reconstruction projects in Iraq. As head of the House Oversight & Government Reform Committee, he was the only committee chair entitled to issue subpoenas without a committee vote. His defeat of John Dingell for chair of Energy and Commerce is not just a personal victory for Henry Waxman; it is potentially a victory for Barack Obama and the issues he committed himself to when he first threw his hat into the ring. Having a man like Henry Waxman chairing House Budget and Commerce makes the chances of President Barack Obama having to either talk through -- or pull rabbits out of -- his hat less of a necessity.

Unlike Dingell, Waxman is neither beholden to -- nor in lockstep with -- the automobile industry. He is in a much better position than his rival titan to enact meaningful global warming legislation. Indeed, he is in a far better position than Dingell to mandate that Detroit produce both hybrid and flex-fuel automobiles which would cut American reliance on foreign oil and have a positive effect on the global environment.

Perhaps Barack Obama will improve upon Sandburg's dictum and find yet a fourth use for a hat: throwing it joyfully into the air whenever a campaign promise becomes the law of the land.

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November 21, 2008 in [Congress](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

November 27, 2008

## *Comedy, Tragedy, Economy*

Horace Walpole [1717-1797], the master of Strawberry Hill and 4th Earl of Oxford, was a noted writer, art historian, antiquarian and member of the English Parliament. He was also a first-class wit. His best-known epigram teaches "**This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel.**" For Walpole, this was far more than a mere aphorism; it provided, in his words, "a solution of why Democritus laughed and Heraclitus wept." [*Note: Democritus and Heraclitus were two pre-Socratic thinkers, known respectively as "The Laughing Philosopher," and the "The Weeping Philosopher."*]

Walpole's quip has been banging around my brain the past several days as I digest and contemplate what is being written and said about the emerging Obama economic team and the even more emergent Obama economic strategy. For those who *think* -- and thus more likely to find *comedy* in this world -- the Obama economic team and strategy are laughably *Clintonus revivicus* -- Clinton revisited. "*And he promised the American people a new beginning with new faces!*" the thinkers snort. "*What's so new about Volker, Summers and Geithner [who by the way is not Jewish]? Aren't they all Rubin retreads? We know what to expect! More kowtowing to Wall Street at the expense of Main Street. What a joke!*"

Then, there are those who *feel* -- the *tragedians*. Their lament goes something like: "*There's no way on earth Obama's going to be able to fulfill any of his campaign promises. Universal Health-care, Global Warming, Alternative Fuels -- they're all pipe dreams. Sure as God made little green*

*apples, he's going to put us into an economic hole from which we're never going to emerge!"*

Could it be that both the thinkers and the empathes have it wrong? To my way of thinking what President-Elect Obama has laid out so far is *not* the second coming of Bill Clinton and doesn't mean the stillbirth of his vision for America. I think a large part of the problem is that those of us who think or feel -- or indeed, both -- have become so accustomed to [and frustrated by] second-rate thinking, shallowness, callowness, cronyism and political slight-of-hand, that we have lost the ability to trust, to believe or even to hope.

Yes, many members of Barack Obama's economic team *do* have a connection to the Clinton White House -- and mostly through Robert Rubin. But let us ask: if Barack Obama had named people with virtually no connection to the Clinton White House, Treasury of the Fed, would the critics have been any less voluble? Was he supposed to select people whose only experience was theoretical or -- even worse -- garnered in the Bush White House? The obvious answer is "no." And, from listening to what Obama's picks have been saying the past few days, it is clear that their thinking, their understanding of economic reality, has both grown and shifted with the times.

One of the things that Americans are going to have to get used to is something which much of the rest of the world has already figured out: that Barack Obama is one hell of a lot smarter than most of us. I don't know about you, but I for one feel much more comfortable and optimistic having a president who is both brilliant and politically gifted. Yes, we have had really brainy presidents in our lifetime; Carter and Clinton both had stratospheric I.Q.s -- for all the good it did them. And, we've had presidents who were politically gifted; Johnson and Reagan come to mind. But with Barack Obama, we see a man who is both. Already, he is laying the groundwork for what looks like it will be a harmonious, highly productive working relationship with Congress. In selecting Rahm Emanuel as White House Chief of Staff, Obama has a key man who sees partners and allies where others have seen only enemies and adversaries. Unbelievably, it may well be that the lame duck 110th Congress will pass Obama's economic stimulus package even before he takes the oath of office January 20th.



As noted above, the "tragedians" are already predicting that due to our overwhelming fiscal crisis, the entirety of Obama's campaign promises of social and economic reform are D.O.A. Not so fast. From what the president-elect has been saying and indicating the past several days, these social and economic reforms are actually part of -- not apart from -- our economic recovery. His proposed economic stimulus package -- which may well be on his desk for signing come January 20, 2009 -- dwarfs anything ever attempted by the federal government. And while the professional wet blankets and troglodytes of talk radio have already damned the incoming administration to the fires of Hell, Wall Street and much of the world's financial markets are responding most positively. No doubt part of this is the result of a collective sigh of relief; George W. Bush and his cowboys are finally headed for the bunkhouse. Most, however, seems to spring from the very real understanding that the United States will once again, after so many years, be in the hands of professionals.

From all indications, Barack Obama has a holistic view of the economy. Health care, green energy investment, education reform and a new approach to regulating financial markets are all part of this view. One little-noted example of what the *Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne termed Obama's "decision to tether social and economic policy" came a couple of days ago when, in the midst of naming his economic team, the president-elect also announced Melody Barnes as the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council.

Back on March 4, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt took the oath of office and embarked on his "First hundred days." During those heady hundred days, the 73rd Congress enacted everything from the Emergency Banking Relief Act [March 9], and Civilian Conservation Corps Reforestation Relief Act [March 31] to the Federal Emergency Relief Act [May 12] and the Tennessee Valley Authority Act [May 18]. Many of the nation's leading business writers and financial lions accused both Roosevelt and Congress of being dangerous, out-of-touch Socialists; traitors who were attaching a lethal anchor to the body politic. And yet, in so many ways, Roosevelt and his New Dealers were proven both farsighted and correct. They literally saved a nation.

We can fully expect both those who perceive the world as comedy and those as tragedy to cast vitriolic aspersions upon the Obama Administration and the incoming 111th Congress. They will accuse them of conspiring to

bring America to wreck and ruin; some will even persist in the canard that it was Obama himself who caused the recession and that if only America had voted for McCain-Palin, none of this would have occurred.

Be both patient and hopeful of better days to come. And while you're at it, turn a deaf ear to the naysayers of comedy and tragedy whenever they speak of economy.

For as Horace Walpole also quipped:

*"By deafness one gains in one respect more than one loses; one misses more nonsense than sense."*

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## Beating the Bushes:

### All Politics, All The Time

December 04, 2008

## *Prejudging the Future, Ignoring the Past*

Whether we realize it or not, Søren Kierkegaard, that most abstruse of 19th century Existentialist philosophers, is all the rage these days. Well, maybe *he's* not all the rage, but one twelve-word quote generally attributed to him certainly is.

To wit: *"You should live your life forward and understand it in the past."*

With the recent release of thousands upon thousands of hours of Nixon tapes, we have what at first blush is a repudiation of Kierkegaard's dictum. For in listening to those tapes -- and thereby deriving a better understanding of Nixon the man, his motives and his mania -- we are blurring the distinction between past, present and future. For the tapes were made in what at the time was the *present*, meant to be stored away for the *future*, presumably to . . .

To do precisely what? Did Nixon make those surreptitious tapes with an eye toward assisting future generations in their understanding of the past? Or perhaps in order to justify his actions in what was then the present? We may never know what his precise motivation was; and perhaps that is just as well. Eventually of course, the ever "New" Nixon did issue a blanket *mea culpa*. As a man who was deeply concerned about what his future place in history would be, this was both essential and understandable.

*"You should live your life forward and understand it in the past."*

The Nixon example aside, Kierkegaard [or whoever was the real author of these twelve words] was correct. Obviously, no one who is of flesh and blood can live life in any direction other than forward. Likewise no one can understand or judge something that has not yet occurred. Simply and

stupidly stated, history does not occupy the future, only the past. And though asking a question like "what would the world have been like if there never had been a break-in at the Watergate?" may be a great way to spend an evening, it is little more than an academic exercise.

And while it is undoubtedly true that everyone will, from time to time, have those "if only I knew then what I know now" moments they are, of course, generally wistful, occasionally regretful, but never real. One obviously cannot derive knowledge in the past from actions or events which have yet to take place. Conversely, it is both absurd and impossible to write or judge the history of the future -- unless one is into science fiction.

Or is it?

Amazingly, we are beginning to see more and more examples of people rewriting the present before it has completely passed, or prejudging the future before it has even arrived.

First things first: rewriting the present before it has completely passed.

Of late, George W. Bush has been submitting to personal, one-on-one interviews with ABC News' Charlie Gibson and presidential sister Doro Bush Koch. In reviewing interview transcripts, several points come through loud and clear:

- George Bush is hardly what one would term an introspective man.
- He is not particularly concerned about how history will judge his presidency. [*"I guess I don't worry about long-term history, since I'm not going to be around to read it . . ."*]
- He is generally incapable of accepting blame for anything that went wrong during his two terms in office. [*"I regret that the intelligence about WMD's was wrong."*]
- He is already in the process of rewriting history. [*"I think when the history of this period is written, people will realize a lot of the decisions that were made on Wall Street took place over a decade or so before I arrived as President."*]

What is more, as reported on the December 3rd edition of *The Rachael Maddow Show*, former senior Bush advisers including Karl Rove and Karen Hughes are already meeting inside the White House as part of the "Bush Legacy Project." Their job is reshaping the man, the myth and his

accomplishments by which future historians will report on "The Decider's" presidency.

In other words, from all indications, George W. Bush and his associates are doing everything in their power to rewrite the past right here in the present, in the hopes that future generations will ignore the past. It will, of course, be up to those future generations to ignore the Bush version of history and determine for themselves precisely why this man left office with the lowest ratings of any president in modern history. [The reality is so bad, I wouldn't be surprised if the next generation of linguists reduce the Latin alphabet by one letter so that is goes "S,T,U,V . . . X,Y,Z."]

But for now, let us return to Kierkegaard:

*"You should live your life forward and understand it in the past."*

We have already determined that it is the height of absurdity to write or prejudge the future -- for the painfully obvious reason that it has yet to occur.

But that is exactly what an awful lot of conservative writers, bloggers, sore-head losers and racists have been doing.

On any given day, running along this Blog's right-hand margin, one will find a link leading to an anti-Barack Obama website. This site claims to have 13,700 designs and slogans for sale, among which are:

- "Obama: Why Stupid People Should Not Vote!"
- "Join the Communist Party! This Way to Progress! Apply Now at Obama.com!"
- "Vote Barack Obama: Because Everyone Else Deserves What You've Worked Hard For!"
- "I'm Republican Because We All Can't Be On Welfare!"

And these are among the *least* offensive

Then there are those who, sensing -- perhaps fearing -- that the Obama Administration will address the nation's horrifying financial collapse by taking a page out of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal play-book, have actually taken to prejudging the future by both rewriting and ignoring the past.

As an example, in his November 30 op-ed piece, *Washington Post* columnist George Will asserted, "*The assumption is that the New Deal vanquished the Depression. Intelligent, informed people differ about why the Depression lasted so long. But people whose recipe for recovery today is another New Deal should remember that America's biggest industrial collapse occurred in 1937, eight years after the 1929 stock market crash and nearly five years into the New Deal. In 1939, after a decade of frantic spending -- President Herbert Hoover increased it more than 50 percent between 1929 and the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt -- unemployment was 17.2 percent.*"

The "facts" and "statistics" Will employs come from *Wall Street Journal* writer Amity Shlaes' 2007 book *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*. Well, even Shlaes has admitted that this data ignored "emergency" public employment. In other words, Roosevelt's New Deal actually did far, far more good than Will's wants people to believe. In essence, he is ignoring the past in order to prejudge the future.

Another example would be syndicated columnist Mona Charen who, also citing Shlaes writes, "*The New Deal's chief object was never achieved -- it did not solve the nation's unemployment problem.*" Will went even further when, appearing on the ABC news show *This Week*, asked, "*Before we go into a new New Deal, can we just acknowledge that the first New Deal didn't work? That is,*" he added, "*the biggest collapse in industrial production in history occurred in 1937, eight years after the stock market collapse of 1929, five years into the New Deal.*"

Essentially then, what both are saying is, "*Hey, this plan of Obama's won't work -- no way, no how! And how do we know this? Because we know that Roosevelt's New Deal was both a fraud and a failure! So there!!*"

This is revisionist history, plain and simple, used in order to prejudge the future.

To be certain, no one has a crystal ball that predicts what will occur tomorrow, let alone next week, next month or next year. But those who rewrite today's events in order to make tomorrow's take on history better -- and those who rewrite history in order to "prove" that the future won't work -- suffer from either an anemic approach to academia or a hubristic sense of history.

In either case, they have a problem with the truth.

Perhaps they should go back and reread Kierkegaard . . .

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# Beating the Bushes:

All Politics, All The Time

December 11, 2008

## *Knowledge Isn't Always Power*

For what to some are fairly obvious reasons, there is more than a bit of irony in a practicing Jew quoting a fellow named Bacon. It neither passes the smell test nor feels quite *kosher*. Then again, what's life without a whiff of illogic or a morsel of imaginary *trayf*? I mean, it's not like the mere quoting of Sir Francis will lead to a deathless yearning for a BLT, or visions of fatted swine rotating on a greasy spit . . .

Oh what the heck; let's throw caution to the wind and quote the old boy:

***"Knowledge is power."***

There, I've gone and done it! But you know something? It wasn't nearly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Moreover, with all that's been going on for the past God knows how long, it's probably no longer even true.

Simply stated, in this day and age knowledge *isn't* always power.

Currently, there are people running all over Capitol Hill -- and up and down Pennsylvania Avenue as well -- all loudly proclaiming that they never suspected:

- The economy was in such bad shape, or
- That major banks were on the verge of collapse, or
- That all those no-money-down, interest-only mortgages would eventually spell doom and disaster, or
- That the Big Three Automakers ["BTA"] were sinking in quicksand, or
- That America's been in a recession for more than a year.



From all available evidence, it is obvious that the facts, the figures, the forecast -- i.e., the knowledge -- have been available to legislators and regulators, executives and lobbyists for quite some time.

In 2005, federal bank regulators, correctly assessing the crisis looming just over the horizon, proposed a series of guidelines for institutions writing risky loans. In light of what has transpired in the mortgage industry of late, their warnings and proposals seem to have been written by some Delphic oracle:

- They correctly warned bankers that "exotic mortgages" were often being granted to buyers who had bad -- even no -- credit.
- They urged banks to make sure that buyers "actually had jobs and could afford houses."
- They proposed "a cap on risky mortgages" so that a "string of defaults wouldn't be crippling."
- They strongly urged banks to "help buyers make responsible decisions" by clearly advising them that "interest rates might skyrocket and huge payments might be due sooner than expected."

All of these proposals remained precisely that: proposals.

In January 2006, Paris Welch, a prominent California mortgage lender tried to blow the whistle on all these no money-down, low-interest mortgages as well, warning anyone in authority who would listen to "Expect fallout, expect foreclosures, expect horror stories." She -- among others -- correctly predicted that without stringent regulation, the mortgage industry in particular -- and the American economy in general -- were heading for a major implosion. And yet, despite having this knowledge -- which, according to Sir Francis Bacon, should have been empowering -- both Congress and the Bush Administration chose to listen to other voices that spoke very different words.

Bankers proclaimed that all the so-called "troubled mortgages" were in reality, no trouble at all. As a result of their proclamations (and an intense campaign put on by their paid lobbyists), regulators delayed taking action until it was too late -- at which time these very bankers either went under or came back to Congress asking for buckets and buckets of bailout money.

As an example, David Schneider, the former home loan president of Washington Mutual ("WaMU"), told federal regulators in early 2006 that

"These mortgages have been considered more safe for portfolio lenders than many fixed rate mortgages." Schneider backed up his testimony with lots of paid lobbying in an effort to convince Congress, regulators and a sympathetic White House that he knew the situation better than any or all of the prophets of doom and gloom.

Guess again: Within two years of uttering these words, both Schneider and WaMU were out of business. Indeed, the WaMU collapse was the largest bank failure in U.S. history.

Here we have a clear-cut example of knowledge not leading to power, because knowledge and power were, in essence, occupying different universes

Now this is *not* to say that had Congress, the White House and all their buddies indeed gotten off their collective arses and started using the knowledge at hand sooner, that none of our current problems or challenges would exist. The sad truth is that we will never know, because much of Congress and virtually all of the Bush Administration, chose to pay attention not to those with the facts and figures, but rather to lobbyists representing the very interests they should have been regulating in the first place.

Generally speaking, knowledge without will, vision, integrity or courage, has a most difficult time of translating into power. In the *political* arena, it is close to impossible; a process that lacks will, vision, integrity and courage will more often than not become an exercise in futility, a *danse macabre* where hidden agendas abound, and what started being potentially empowering, becomes either an impediment or an irrelevancy.

Yesterday, the 10th of December 2008, the House of Representatives passed a \$14 billion loan-guarantee package for the "BTA." In addition to the money, the measure mandates that the BTA submit a reorganization plan (or suffer the consequence of having to immediately repay the loan) by March 31, 2009. It further creates the executive post of "Car Czar," who will have what appears to be unfettered authority to get the Big Three back on tract. (*Honestly, why we persist in using the term "Czar" is beyond me; I'm sure Congressman Frank must be aware of just how profligate and imperious most of the Russian despots were. After all, much of his family escaped from Czarist Russia!*)

In order for the bill to become law, it will of course have to pass the Senate. And here is where the going gets rough. For despite having the *knowledge* of what will likely happen if the BTA go under, many Senate Republicans are against the plan. Indeed, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R.KY), whose state has more than 50,000 jobs related to the industry, has already said he will cast a "no" vote. Instead, he supports an amendment by Tennessee Republican Bob Corker that would force severe cuts on union workers and auto industry bondholders as part of the bailout.

McConnell, Corker, and many of their Republican colleagues, represent states that have non-union auto plants. They see this bail-out measure as an opportunity to bust the UAW and stick bondholders with enormous losses -- matters which are purely political and have little to do with saving the American automobile industry. Additionally, one of the bill's amendments that is under extraordinary fire forbids any company receiving loans from using any of that money for financing their lobbying efforts against new, more stringent carbon emissions standards recently enacted by California and a dozen other states. Despite the knowledge that the "cleaner the car," the more likely consumers are to purchase them, the BTA's friends and lobbyists are fighting this measure tooth and nail.

In other words, for many, it's politics as usual.

Oh that the knowledge we did possess could have empowered our elected leaders to act before things got to such a pass -- as we were careening into recession. Unfortunately, whatever knowledge was available was ignored, twisted, obfuscated or just plain buried.

Why?

Well, according to Sir Francis -- who's getting easier to quote -- the answer may well be that

*"Nothing is more damaging to a state than that cunning men pass for wise."*

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*Note: Within 24 hours of posting this article, Senate Democrats decided to abandon their efforts to bail out the auto industry. The stated reason for the abandonment was Republican intransigence; GOP senators balked at*

*supporting any bill that would not, in essence, destroy the United Autoworkers Union. The Democrats knew that under these circumstances, they didn't have the 60 votes needed to for the measure to pass.*

December 11, 2008 in [All Politics All The Time](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBack \(0\)](#)

# Beating the Bushes

All Politics, All The Time

December 17, 2008

*That 's "Madoff" as in "Made-Off"*

**Question:** When is an allegation not an allegation?

**Answer:** When the one against whom the allegation has been lodged, has already confessed.

**Example:** Wall Street titan Bernard Madoff's confession to a mind-boggling Ponzi scheme in which he made-off with approximately \$50 billion of his client's money.

Madoff's victims' list is a scandal-monger's wet dream; an eerie amalgam of the *Wall Street Journal*, *Daily Forwards*, *Financial Times*, *Palm Beach Shiny Sheet*, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, and *Congressional Record* with more than a touch of *People* and *The Hollywood Reporter* thrown in. The roster of victims includes many of the best-heeled and most-accomplished stars in the financial firmament. Most sadly, one notes amongst the file of the fleeced a preponderance of Jewish individuals and organizations: Spielberg, Katzenberg, Roth, and Zuckerman; Yeshiva University, the Shapiro Family, Hadassah, and the Los Angeles Jewish Federation, to name but a few. And that's not even taking into account all his foreign investors.

The issue of his having so many Jewish victims is perhaps THE classic example of what most every *Yiddische kinder's bubbe* or *zayde* called ***a shanda fur die goyim***, namely, "An incredible embarrassment for the Jewish people that is available for all the Gentiles of the world to see . . ." (Yes, it IS simply amazing that it takes 19 English words to translate a measly five words in Yiddish!)

When Senator Larry Craig messes around in some airport men's room, that's hypocrisy; when Governor Eliot Spitzer messes around with prostitutes, that's ***a shanda fur die goyim***. When California Representative Randy "Duke" Cunningham gets convicted of selling votes, that's a scandal; when Jack

Abramoff goes to prison for bribing the Dukester, that's *a shanda fur die goyim*.

Are we all clear on this?

Of course, questions about the Madoff *shanda* abound:

- How could Madoff's scheme go undetected for so many, many years?
- How could such a who's who of supposedly savvy, accomplished people be so blind?
- Where was the Securities Exchange Commission?
- Should the scammed shoulder any of the blame?
- What became of all the money?
- Is there any hope of restitution for the victims?
- Are there further surprises looming just over the horizon?

As to the last question, I understand there is the possibility that those who made-off with their Madoff profits -- even if it were years before the scandal came to light -- may have to forfeit a sizeable portion of said profits according to a legal principle called "Fraudulent Conveyance." Imagine that! Say in 1998, a Madoff investor called Bernie and told him to cash him out, and then put the proceeds into a dozen apartment buildings. The buildings all appreciated in value and said investor then sold them for an enormous profit. Under terms of the "Uniform Fraudulent Conveyance Act," he (or she) could easily be liable to give up a hefty percentage of the final profits in order to help pay off other Madoff investors who were not so lucky!

Will this in fact happen? I don't know; my crystal ball is still at the cleaners. What I do know is that were such a legal principle to be enforced, it could be, as financial writer Lee Stewart notes, "Key to reforming financial markets and a return to regulation based on social conscience . . . [and] due diligence." Over the years, there were quite a few hints that not all was kosher at Bernard Madoff Investment Securities LLC. And yet despite a haunting feeling that there was more than a hint of *trayf* mixed in with the *kreplach*, the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) -- which *did* do a bit of investigating -- declared that all was kosher at BMIS.

For nearly 50 years, BMIS portrayed itself as the epitome of financial rectitude; investing with Bernie was as safe as investing with your favorite uncle. According to the BMIS website, "*In an era of faceless organizations owned by equally faceless organizations, Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC harks back to an earlier era in the financial world: The owner's name on the door. Clients know that Bernard Madoff has a personal interest in maintaining the unblemished record of value, fair-dealing, and high ethical standards that has always been the firm's hallmark.*"

The SEC's failure to find anything amiss at BMIS has already begun the process of accusatory finger-pointing. One can only hope that the SEC's failure will also lead to the blessed end of the era of unfettered, unregulated markets. It is also to be hoped that once he takes the oath of office, President Barack Obama will appoint someone with far more investigative chops than Christopher Cox to head the SEC.

There are no doubt plenty of people already secretly gloating over the incredible losses suffered by billionaires like Spielberg, Katzenberg, Zuckerman and Shapiro. What these gloaters would do well to understand is that in most of the high-profile cases, the ones who will suffer the most from the Madoff debacle aren't Spielberg the filmmaker or Shapiro the clothing magnate to cite but two examples, but rather all those who might benefit from their charitable foundations. What Bernard Madoff has made-off with is not just the dreams of a secure retirement or an estate to pass on to one's children and grandchildren; he has also made-off with all those millions upon millions of dollars that fund Tay-Sachs testing programs, study trips to Israel, meals-on-wheels for the elderly and thousands of other selfless acts of humanity. Bernard Madoff has not only made-off with \$50 billion in wealth; he has plunged a dagger into the very heart of hope.

One fascinating question deals with the potential culpability of the defrauded; of what we might refer to as the *obsido caveo* ("Investor Beware") factor. Most of us have heard at one time or another that "If something sounds too good to be true, it likely isn't." Well, didn't Bernard Madoff's investors have some inkling that not all was sweet-smelling in Denmark? Did not one ask him or herself how it was that BMIS continued reaping such wonderful returns-on-investment when others were not? Did they all believe that Bernie Madoff was the smartest man in the world, or did they just simply not want to challenge the assumption?

In the Jewish world, we have a concept quite the opposite of *obsido caveo*; something known as "*chezkat l'adahm kashayr*," meaning roughly, "We make the presumption that a person is kosher -- honest." Now, this does not mean that we simply take someone at their word; to do so would be foolish. Let us say that we enter a store that has a sign on the door proclaiming "We Sell Kosher Meat." Something about the store's layout makes us wonder if indeed, the meat is kosher. Let's say we then put our concerns aside and make a purchase because this merchant sells meat for a lot less than any other kosher butcher in town. If it then turns out that the meat is *trayf* (not kosher), we can certainly blame the butcher and say, "I presumed that he wouldn't have put up that sign unless his meat truly was kosher. Shame on him for leading me astray!" Then too, according to Jewish law, part of the culpability is ours for not exercising due diligence. This is where *obsido caveo* meets *chezkat l'adahm kashayr*.

The same could possibly be said for some of Madoff's investors -- that they did not exercise due diligence. Some were undoubtedly convinced of Madoff's honesty, integrity and financial acumen by the fact that someone they respected or trusted gave him their "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." Others likely just did not want to question how he could be providing such a wonderful return on investment where others could not. In either case, the results were the same: deep losses and even deeper depression.

The strategy by which Bernie Madoff bilked his clients is generally called a "Ponzi Scheme." It is named for Charles Ponzi, an Italian immigrant who cheated tens of thousands in the early 1900s. In this sort of scam, the con pays off his early investors with money gleaned by later marks. Most know the term even if they never knew of its eponymous ancestor. One wonders if perhaps "Madoff" won't soon replace "Ponzi" as the ultimate financial scam.

For indeed, Bernard Madoff has "Made-Off" with a fortune.

Let us just hope and pray that something good comes out of it . . .

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# Beating The Bushes

All Politics, All The Time

December 26, 2008

*Weyrich and Warren and Gays . . . Oh My!*

This past week brought news that the conservative icon Paul Weyrich had passed away. The 66-year old Weyrich, who spent the last several years of his life suffering the torments of Job, was a seminal figure on the political right: co-founder of the conservative Heritage Foundation and driving force behind the Free Congress Foundation. The man who coined the phrase "Moral Majority," Weyrich was a leading proponent of "Dominionism," the tendency among some conservative, politically-active Christians, to seek influence or control over secular civil government through political action. He was also a highly effective political strategist and organizer. It was in this latter guise that Weyrich was able to convince evangelical Christian leaders like Jerry Falwell and James D. Kennedy that they should get off the bench and into the game; that there were serious social ills which necessitated their involvement in the political process. Among these ills were abortion, school prayer, and the rise of feminism. Thus, it was Weyrich, perhaps more than any other, who could legitimately lay claim to being the matchmaker between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party.

In passing, it should also be noted that the late Mr. Weyrich had some pretty unpalatable beliefs:

- Back in the late 1970s, he claimed that were the "Feminazi ERA" to pass, good Christian schoolgirls would be forced to use unisex restrooms.
- He found no problem using \$250,000 of beer baron [and John Birch Society underwriter] Joseph Coor's money to start the Heritage Foundation.
- In an April 2001 article entitled "Indeed He is Risen!", Weyrich wrote, ". . . Christ was crucified by the Jews who had wanted a temporal ruler to rescue them from the oppressive Roman authorities . . . . Jesus Christ, the son of God, performed incredible miracles, even raised people from the dead. He was not what the Jews had expected, so they considered Him a threat. Thus he was put to death."

For more than 30 years, the marriage between Weyrich's "Moral Majority" and the G.O.P. possessed a fair amount political fecundity. At one time, they could honestly claim credit for handing back congress to the Republicans; of elevating Newt Gingrich to Speaker of the House; of making the GOP inhospitable to any and all but the most hard-right. They were certainly pivotal in electing presidents from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, and then keeping their social agendas in line. And while that marriage never quite could repeal Roe v. Wade or make homosexuality a crime against the state, it was not for any lack of trying. And yet, there was always a tension between Weyrich's hard right philosophy and those of a slightly more pragmatic stripe; an inviolate line between the "true believers" and "true politicians." Indeed, at one time, Weyrich stated that "The problem with Gingrich is that he does not have any immutable principles that he would die for."

In the past year or two, some members of Weyrich's coalition have begun whether it is inconsistent for committed Christians to turn their collective backs on the poor, the hungry, the worker, or indeed, the earth itself. In many quarters there has been an emergent hope that some would find comfort -- if indeed, not a new home -- within the Democratic fold. Despite that old saw "hope springs eternal," John McCain captured a very respectable 75% of the Christian Right vote in the recent election.

As noted above, Weyrich's death was announced this past week.

This week, comes word that California über-Pastor Rick Warren will be delivering the invocation at Barack Obama's inauguration. Like the Weyrich story, this announcement has brought about an avalanche of coverage; unlike the Weyrich story however, this one has also caused a storm of controversy. For Warren -- spiritual leader of the 20,000+ member, multi-campus Saddleback Church, best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, and motivational speaker *par excellent* -- has likened homosexuality to pedophilia, claimed that gay marriage endangers freedom of speech, and said that homosexuality is not a natural way of life, and thus not a human right. Moreover, until just three days ago, Warren's church website stated:

*Because membership in a church is an outgrowth of accepting the Lordship and leadership of Jesus in one's life, someone unwilling to repent of their homosexual lifestyle would not be accepted as a member at Saddleback Church [sic]. That does not mean they cannot attend church -- we hope they do! God's word has the power to change our lives.*

As of December 22, this message no longer appeared on the site. Interestingly, Warren now claims that those who disagree with him on the issue of homosexuality are what he refers to as "Christophobes."

For many of course, the Warren selection is a controversial one. It has caused many to question whether in selecting Warren to give the inaugural invocation, Barack Obama has somehow shown his "true colors;" those of just another politician who goes back on his word once he's elected. Additionally, some are signaling a concern that the Christian Right, far from being defeated, is still a political force with a lot of gas left in the tank.

For its part, the press has reported the disappointment, disagreement and disapprobation of people ranging from Kathryn Kolbert, President of People for the American Way and Brad Luna of the Human Rights Campaign to many of the leading lights in the Hollywood firmament. To listen to -- or read -- them, one would presume that President-elect Obama has pulled the wool over a lot of star-blinded eyes. While I can understand their disappointment and appreciate the passion with which they state their case, they are engaging in what T.S. Elliot once termed the "objective correlative": too much emotion for too little cause.

We might as well face some facts:

1. That whenever and wherever religion and politics intersect, sparks are undoubtedly going to fly.
2. That in addition to being both highly gifted and incredibly articulate, Barack Obama is one hell of a deft politician.
3. That being a great politician does not always require one to leave their core beliefs or ideals by the side of the road.
4. That as far back as his *Harvard Law Review* days Barack Obama, unlike most leaders of the past 65 years, has made it a cardinal principle of including those with whom he disagrees.
5. That lost in the news shuffle is the fact that the President Elect has also chosen the Rev. Joseph Lowery to deliver the inaugural benediction. [For those who are unaware, Rev. Lowery, a giant of the Civil Rights Movement, stands foursquarely with the gay, lesbian and transgender community.]

Many progressives see the Warren invitation as a betrayal of the left. Then too, many conservatives see it as nothing more than a sop to the right; a means of currying a fistful favor with those who are instinctively closer to Weyrich and Warren than to Obama and Lowery. They see the Warren invitation as proof that the Christian Right still wields power in this country; that no president can hope to govern without it.

To my way of thinking, both sides just don't get it. Throughout his campaign, Barack Obama told anyone willing to listen that unlike most, he was not the sort of leader who shuts out or ignores those with whom he disagrees. A majority voted for him after hearing his message. He told us that while he may not be leading the parade in favor of gay marriage, he was certainly was in

step with their aspirations and dreams of equality. Unlike the Bushes, Cheneys and Weyrichs of this world, Barack Obama has shown he possesses the grace, dignity and self-confidence to work with those whom others would consider dire enemies.

We ignore this fact at both our psychic and our political peril.

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