



History News Network

Because the Past is the Present, and the Future too

[donations](#) | [archives](#) | [newsletter](#) | [contact](#) | [about us](#) | [FAQ's](#)

June 20, 2005 Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

Departments
[Breaking News](#)
[Hot Topics](#)
[Books](#)
[HNN Blogs](#)
[Features](#)
[Roundup](#)
[News Abroad](#)
[News at Home](#)
[Culture Watch](#)
[Fact & Fiction](#)
[Historians/History](#)
[History Q & A](#)
[Student Shortcuts](#)
[Teacher's Lounge](#)
[Log In](#)

POTUS -- Rick Shenkman

Mr. [Shenkman](#) is the author of *Presidential Ambition: Gaining Power At Any Cost* (HarperCollins). He is the editor of HNN.

Thursday, May 26, 2005

Time Off for POTUS

I am going to take a break from blogging for the next month. See you in July. Rick

Posted by Editor at [3:59 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Wednesday, May 18, 2005

What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?

On the CBS Evening News last night the reporter was stumped. Bob Schieffer wanted to know if the White House had ever told the media how to report a story. Nope, said the White House correspondent. This had never happened.

Ok, maybe the White House Press Secretary had never been as bold (or arrogant) as Scott McClellan was when he publicly [as the NYT put it](#).

pressed Newsweek on Tuesday to go beyond a retraction and "help repair the damage" to the image of the United States in the Muslim world after the magazine mistakenly reported that a Pentagon investigation had found that interrogators at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, tried to flush a Koran down a toilet.

But White Houses going back to the Kennedy administration have been managing the news and directing reporters how to write their stories. Kennedy famously told the NYT not to report on the Bay of Pigs disaster and repeatedly tried to shape the coverage provided by his friend Ben Bradley and the Alsop columnists.

What? The American media taking its cues from the American president? Yes, Virginia, it has happened. And for the media to pretend to be shocked--shocked!--that it has happened again is plain balderdash.

During the 1960 campaign candidate Kennedy's TV media advisor, J. Leonard Reinsch, told the director of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate to broadcast a reaction shot of Nixon sweating. This was as good as telling the NYT to publish a smear story against Nixon on the front page--and was probably more effective.

A few years later, the Kennedy State Department told NBC not to run a documentary about the digging of a tunnel underneath the Berlin Wall out of fear it would increase Cold War tension.

Richard Nixon, impressed with Kennedy's management of the news, tried repeatedly to influence the way the media covered stories. Usually, he failed--but it wasn't for lack of trying. Egged on by Henry Kissinger, Nixon even instituted court proceedings to stop the NYT from publishing the Pentagon Papers. John Mitchell, the attorney general, once flatly threatened the *Washington Post*, warning reporter Carl Bernstein that "Katie Graham's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer" if she published a piece critical of the Nixon campaign. And then there was the strange incident in which Kissinger tried to stop *Time Magazine* from naming him Man of the Year -- Kissinger feared that a magazine cover story in the prestigious *Time* would alienate Nixon, who craved the positive media attention Kissinger was receiving.

Be a Friend of HNN

Make a Tax-Deductible DONATION

History News Network
 119 S. Main St. Ste. 220
 Seattle, WA 98104

Roundup

[Historians' Take on the News](#)
[Media's Take on the News](#)
[History Being Talked About](#)
[Comments About Historians](#)
[Historians in the News](#)
[Pop Culture](#)
[Audio History](#)
[Top 10!](#)

HNN Blogs

[Cleopatra](#)
[Liberty & Power](#)
[Judith Apter Klinghoffer](#)
[Alan Lichtman](#)
[Thomas C. Reeves](#)
[Mark A. LeVine](#)
[Daniel Pipes](#)
[Rebunk](#)
[Theory & Practice](#)
[POTUS](#)

Blogs

[Altercation](#)
[American Amnesia](#)
[Andrew Sullivan](#)
[Atires/Eschaton](#)
[Critical Mass](#)
[Crooked Timber](#)
[Informed Comment](#)
[Instapundit](#)
[Little Professor](#)
[Matthew Yglesias](#)
[Political Animal](#)
[Relevant History](#)
[Scott McLemee](#)
[Talking Points Memo](#)
[Tapped](#)
[Volokh Conspiracy](#)
[Wanniski](#)

Other Media

[American Prospect](#)
[Arts and Letters Daily](#)
[History News Service](#)
[New York Times](#)
[Newsday](#)
[NPR](#)
[Romanesko](#)
[Salon](#)

Going back even further ... FDR's aides famously told the press not to report on the difficulty he had walking (and even forbade the taking of pictures in his wheelchair)?

So what's really new here?

Posted by Editor at 8:39 PM | Comments (7)

The American Chalabi

It finally hit me who Chalabi's American counterpart was. James Wilkinson, the duplicitous head of the army in the 1790s who collected a salary from Spain while he was also on the US payroll. Most Americans have heard nothing about him. That's too bad. It's helpful to remember the scalawags from history. And Wilkinson was one of the greatest. Among his sins was that he conspired with Aaron Burr to detach several western states in a crazy plot that was to end with Burr's naming himself leader of the West (including Mexico!). This at any rate is what Burr's enemies alleged. Whatever the truth, Wilkinson was a bad egg.

In the 1970s I was working for a brief time for the Jackson Papers Project. Harriet Owsley, the widow of celebrated Southern historian Frank Owsley, was working in the office as a key editor. One day Wilkinson's name came up. She hissed when speaking his name.

It is worth remembering that we had a Wilkinson as we watch events unfold in Iraq. It is particularly important when considering the strange career of Chalabi. His up/down/up again mercurial career both astonishes and appalls. But we shouldn't be too shocked. Characters like him came along in our own salad days.

Like Chalabi, Wilkinson kept popping up again and again despite the mud coming off his boots because he was, like Chalabi, scheming, ambitious and lucky. By all counts he should have been washed up when he became entangled with Burr; at the least he should have been cashiered from the army. But Jefferson kept him on because a fight just then with Wilkinson would have proved damaging to the national administration. So instead of going down in history as another Benedict Arnold Wilkinson went down as a minor leader of the Revolution and was largely forgotten.

Chalabi should be so lucky.

Posted by Editor at 6:16 PM | Comments (0)

Sunday, May 15, 2005

Democracy Abroad, But Not at Home

Out of power and angry about it, the Sunnis have been blowing up stuff in Iraq. Now the NYT reports this [morning](#) that the Bush administration is trying to pressure the Shiites in Iraq "to consider conciliatory gestures that would include allowing former Baath Party members to serve in the government."

Great idea. I wish the Bush people would take their own advice and try this wonderful strategy of conciliation at home.

Fat chance of that happening. Thi kind of democracy is good for the Iraqis but not Americans. Bush officials repeatedly seem to imply. Remember Dick Cheney's pithy comment about the Bush tax cuts, "It's our due." What kind of message about democracy did that comment send?

Bush people are always complaining about the partisan warfare in Congress and Washington. ITS THEIR OWN FAULT. If Bush II had governed like Bush I there would be a lot less of the partisan squabbling.

Imagine for a moment that Bush I, realizing he had a thin claim on legitimacy after the election of 2000, had governed in a bipartisan manner. How different the atmosphere there would be! He might even have included a couple of prominent Democrats in the cabinet to create a unity government after 9-11. But he chose to wield power by dividing the country not uniting it. And now we are supposed to feel sorry for him because the dastardly Democrats are railing on him all the time.

Please.

One cannot govern like a divider and then complain when the country is divided.

[Slate](#)
[TomPaine.Com](#)
[TownHall](#)
[Washington Post](#)
[Weekly Standard](#)
[World Press Review](#)
[Yahoo \(Headlines\)](#)

About Presidents
[National Security Archive](#)
[Center for the Study of the Presidency](#)
[White House](#)

Recent Comments

- [Stephen Francis Kislock III](#) on [Santimonious Cant](#)
- [Editor](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Stephen Tootle](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Ralph E. Luker](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Stephen Tootle](#) on [General Marshall](#)
- [Stephen Tootle](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Editor](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Rick Perlstein](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Ed Schmitt](#) on [What Was Unprecedented Exactly About the White House "Suggestion" to Newsweek?](#)
- [Ed Schmitt](#) on [David Horowitz: The Paul Reverse of Fear?](#)

Archives

- [May 2005](#)
- [April 2005](#)
- [March 2005](#)
- [February 2005](#)
- [January 2005](#)
- [December 2004](#)
- [November 2004](#)
- [October 2004](#)
- [September 2004](#)
- [August 2004](#)
- [July 2004](#)
- [June 2004](#)
- [May 2004](#)

[RSS](#)

[home](#) | [archives](#) | [newsletter](#) | [contact](#) | [about us](#) | [faq](#)

Posted by Editor at [1:11 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Saturday, May 14, 2005

General Marshall

What this country needs is another General Marshall. No, not George Marshall, though he'd do fine.

We need another John Marshall.

I am not especially fond of his conservative approach to government--or his sympathy with the High Federalists who pushed through Congress the Alien and Sedition Acts. (He opposed them publicly but privately considered them meritorious.)

But as a man--as a high official--we have not seen his like in many a generation.

He was a general in the Revolution, a congressman from Virginia in the late 1790s and then in quick succession--secretary of war (though he never accepted the post he was confirmed by the Senate), secretary of state and chief justice of the Supreme Court. And he was qualified for each of those posts.

He actually complained to John Adams, who appointed him to war, state and the Supreme Court, that he wasn't qualified to be secretary of war--and even that is proof of his sterling qualities. When's the last time you heard of a person declining a high office because they felt they lacked the qualifications?

All this comes to mind as I am reading James Simon's What Kind of Nation: Jefferson, Marshall, and the Epic Struggle to Create a United States. If you have a few hours to spare I highly recommend the book. But I warn you. It may make you depressed.

To reflect on where we started and where we have ended up ... well, it's nothing anybody would want to dwell on too long.

Posted by Editor at [10:21 PM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

Friday, May 13, 2005

Santimonious Cant

President Bush, in the course of his recent overseas trip, in which he compared Yalta to the Hitler-Stalin pact: "We will not repeat the mistakes of other generations, appeasing or excusing tyranny, and sacrificing freedom in the vain pursuit of stability."

Whoa!

President Bush obviously wasn't paying attention in history class in his historical methods course. (I assume he had to take one.) History teaches us to step into the shoes of those whose story we are telling. It is necessary to do so to resist the temptation, gained by the 20/20 vision available to those of us living in the future, to cast aspersions on those in the past.

In this case, President Bush would have us believe that FDR blew it at Yalta when he excused tyranny in the pursuit of stability. What would Bush have done were he in FDR's shoes (God forbid that he was!). I suppose we are to believe that he would have spurned Stalin's overtures to cut a deal and instead would have raced back to the US to fire up the Pentagon for another war.

Of course, one can argue, as some have in articles excerpted at HNN, that FDR could at least have insisted that Soviet POW's not be returned to face certain death or detention. But Bush seems to be arguing less subtly that NO DEAL WITH STALIN was moral.

Well, Bush should be lucky no subsequent president, speaking half a century from now, takes him to task similarly for his cruel handshakes with the leader of Pakistan, whatshisname, as Bush stumbled during the 2000 campaign.

The fact is politics is not solely to be judged by the moral standards of priests or preachers, as Bush seems to imply. Down that road lies misery for all. Once take the attitude that politics is a fit career only for those who are morally pure and you end up with misguided santimonious crusades which usually end with a lot of people getting killed.

Come to think of it. That's what we have got.

Posted by Editor at [4:43 PM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

Wednesday, May 11, 2005

David Horowitz: The Paul Revere of Fear?

David Horowitz's evolution from extreme left to extreme right is worth pondering as much for what it tells us about him as about the rest of the country.

He is a perfect symbol of the extremes to which Americans on the margins swing in times of war. While most remain in the middle, some swing left and some swing right.

In the 60s he swung left, aligning himself with the SDS and others of that ilk. Now in the war on terrorism he has swung right, aligning himself with the Old Right (i.e., the people who in the 50s believed that America faced an enemy within that was every bit as dangerous as the enemy without).

How one makes the transition from one extreme to the other is puzzling to me even after reading several of his books. Is there something about his personality that inclines him to reach for extremes? I don't know. Though we have corresponded numerous times I cannot even make an educated guess.

Oddly, while it is difficult to determine why an individual would swing from extreme to extreme, it is easier to determine why a country as a whole would. By now it is a commonplace that millions of Americans in times of danger and insecurity are susceptible to appeals based on the fear of enemies from within. From our earliest history this has been a pattern. When war with France loomed in the late 1790s High Federalists demanded a crackdown on sedition. In speeches on the floor of Congress they demanded that suspect aliens be rounded up and deported.

Horowitz's demands therefore sound a familiar and unfortunate ring. We've heard it before. And always in retrospect these appeals to our fears result in ill-considered public measures.

Why Horowitz wants to be this generation's Paul Revere of fear is beyond me.

Posted by Editor at [2:33 PM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

Friday, May 6, 2005

Fulminating

In today's Wash Post [Charles Krauthammer](#) fulminates about the Democrats opposition to President Bush's Social Security proposal. What really exercises him is that Democrats keep saying there's no crisis in Social Security because the Trust Fund doesn't run out until 2052:

As I have been writing for years with stupefying redundancy -- and obvious lack of success -- this idea is a hoax. There is no trust fund. The past Social Security surpluses were spent the year they were created. The idea that in 2017, when the surpluses disappear, we will be able to go to a box in West Virginia to retrieve the money we need to make up the shortfall (between what Social Security takes in and what it pays out that year) is a deception. There is no money there. It will have to be borrowed or garnered from new taxes.

And as I have been writing for years, the Trust Fund is real. The coming crisis is a fiscal crisis not a Social Security crisis. The pols have been spending the Social Security surplus. It was morally wrong. It meant we were balancing the budget on the backs of workers. All those tax cuts to the wealthy? They came out of the hides of working class people.

What will happen to our politics when the American people figure this out? Ah, that will be something to behold. It will churn up our politics and parties and maybe even lead to the birth of a new party. It is one of those milestones that will mark a true change in our politics. And it is coming.

You heard it here.

Posted by Editor at [3:53 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Wednesday, May 4, 2005

Class Warfare?

Everywhere you turn you hear it: class warfare. One expects the peasants to storm the barricades at the White House. Republicans charge that Democrats are engaging in class warfare in denouncing tax breaks for the wealthy. Democrats charge that it's the Republicans who are engaging in class warfare by designing policies that expressly benefit the wealthy.

The NYT reports that the fear of class warfare extends abroad as well. According to the morning paper Mexico's new rising star, Mexico City Mayor Lopez Obrador, is identified with the class warfare approach of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez.

Everybody should relax. Class warfare is so 19th century.

What is everybody worried about? Marx was wrong. It is not class warfare that motivates people, it is nationalism. You want to get people riled up? Tell them something that gets their patriotic blood boiling. It's nationalism that is changing the world—in China, America, Iraq and elsewhere—not class warfare.

It is not that societies have become classless. It is just that classes have become less hostile to each other.

This is one of the themes in John Lukacs's new book, POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY. I recommend it highly even though I deplore his attitudes toward gays.

Posted by Editor at [4:33 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Saturday, April 30, 2005

The President

Have you noticed? President Bush no longer refers to himself as "the president." (Example: Before the war he would discuss what "the president" must do under this or that circumstance.)

This is a plus--sort of. I always found it grating that he referred to himself that way. It reminded me of stuffed shirts who refer to themselves in the third person.

But more is at stake here than mere style. Bush seems finally to have come to terms with the fact that he is actually president of the United States. Gone is the deliberate distance he created between himself and the office.

But there is a downside. He could now be so comfortable as president that he becomes reckless. Unfortunately, there are signs of recklessness almost daily. His Social Security/tax/judges agenda seems reckless. It presupposes that people will follow him wherever he wants to take them—even over a financial cliff.

A little less hubris might be in order. Those polls he keeps dismissing maybe are worth a second look. He might discover that they are telling him something important.

Posted by Editor at [10:00 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Monday, April 25, 2005

FDR--Polio and the Truth

A letter writer in the Wa Post says it's a myth that FDR's physical limits were covered up:

The myth that Franklin D. Roosevelt's partial paralysis from polio was kept secret from the public that elected him president four times will apparently never die. It has been given a new lease on life by the History Channel's documentary about FDR as well as by media coverage of the film in The Post and elsewhere.

In reality, the basic facts about his condition were known to anyone who read the press closely. For example, in the course of a long, sympathetic 1932 profile of the prospective presidential candidate, Time magazine detailed his being stricken with polio, his partial recovery and his subsequent creation of the Warm Springs Foundation. "Swimming at Warm Springs several months each year and special exercises at Albany have made it possible for the Governor to walk 100 feet or so with braces and canes," Time explained. "When standing at crowded public functions, he still clings precariously to a friend's arm." In November of the same year, Time reported, "At Worcester, Mass., Governor Roosevelt picked Catherine Murphy, 9, also a cripple from infantile paralysis, to send at his own expense to Warm Springs, Ga., for treatment." While the White House understandably did not emphasize his disability, pictures of the president showing his leg braces

frequently appeared in the press.

What purpose does it serve to repeat the easily disproved claim that Americans of the 1930s and '40s were deceived? Could it be that we have a powerful need to feel more tolerant than our grandparents, not only in matters of race and sex but also disability? Accepting the fact that voters 70 years ago knowingly chose a president who couldn't walk, something today's health-obsessed electorate would never do, might simply be too humiliating.

I am afraid this letter writer is misinformed.

People knew FDR had polio. But they did not realize how incapacitated he was.

He could not walk at all by himself. He always needed to lean on someone else.

There's no myth here.

If FDR were known to have been a cripple his enemies would have used this against him. ("He's crippling the country's economy" they might have said, in a none-too-subtle reference to his physical impairment." That they did not suggests that the public remained largely in the dark about his condition and wouldn't have made the connection.

If people knew about his condition and the extent of his physical limitations, why on earth would FDR have gone to such lengths to conceal it? He forbids pictures of himself getting in and out of cars. He allowed just 2 or 3 pictures to be taken of him in his wheelchair. He delivered speeches from his car so as to avoid having to get out in and climb a public platform.

I love American myths. They speak to our humanity and fears and are revealing. But there's no myth here. Debunker, take two aspirin and go to bed. When you awake forget that you ever wrote that letter to the Post.

THANKS to Jonathan Dresner for drawing my attention to the letter.

Posted by Editor at [8:32 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Trust in Government

At dinner last night with friends in Seattle we talked about the question of trust.

Tom Friedman in his new book on the flat world--it's flat, you see, because of the Internet and other technical marvels--says trust is essential to good governance.

So what happens when trust in government evaporates? It evaporated in America as a result of Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran-contra. In the early 1960s upwards of 70% of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. After LBJ, Nixon and Reagan, only 35 percent or so retained the old trust.

Reagan exploited the decline in trust to gain power over this government.

Walt Crowley, one of the dinner guests, pointed out that after people stopped trusting in government they started trusting a lot more in their churches. They had to trust somebody in authority to give shape and form to their lives. So they turned to the churches, which increasingly replaced government as the provider of basic services from daycare to relief.

I had always held both developments to be important but had not, unlike Crowley, linked them. It's an interesting hypothesis. I am sure that even Crowley would agree there are multiple causes for the rise of the present revival of religion. But he has put his finger on an interesting and overlooked aspect.

I noted in the course of the conversation that it's also interesting that the one government institution that religious people DO seem to hold in high esteem is the military.

How strange is that?

Before we can account for the current wave of religious revivalism we will have to explain the faith in the military in faith communities and the decline in those communities of faith in government.

Posted by Editor at [5:39 PM](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

Thursday, April 21, 2005

David Brooks Is Wrong

The other day I blogged that David Brooks is right. (Click here: <http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/11195.html>)

But he's wrong today.

In his column in the NYT (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/21/opinion/21brooks.html?oref=login>) he says that Roe v. Wade poisoned American politics by removing the abortion decision from state legislatures and giving the power over abortion to the courts.

He blames Justice Blackmun for this disaster, opening his piece with one of the most incendiary lines ever published in the NYT: "Justice Harry Blackmun did more inadvertent damage to our democracy than any other 20th-century American."

This not only unfair to Blackmun, it is bad history.

When did politics become poisoned? Not with Roe and not because of abortion, as Brooks claims. Politics changed when Blacks got their Civil Rights. You can see the poison as early as 1948 when Strom Thurmond marched out of the Democratic Convention to form the Dixiecrat Party. After the Brown decision Southerners started demonizing the Supreme Court and calling for the impeachment of Earl Warren.

It wasn't abortion that divided the country. It was race.

Brooks says that the fight over Supreme Court nominations has become explosive because of Roe. Wrong again.

As I demonstrated in a piece published at findlaw.com (and now reprinted on HNN <http://hnn.us/articles/11472.html>) in 2001, the nomination process became the modern equivalent of a cock fight in the summer of 1968, Lyndon Johnson's last year in office, when he nominated Abe Fortas as chief justice:

"It's not Bork the pundits should point to as a turning point. It's Fortas. Russell Long referred to Fortas as one of the 'dirty five' on the Warren Court who voted for criminals. [Crime was the code word for race.] Fellow Southerner James Eastland observed during the battle that he had 'never seen so much feeling against a man as against Fortas.' After Strom Thurmond mounted a successful filibuster against Fortas, Democrats vowed they would not soon forget what had happened. And they did not. They turned down Haynsworth, Senator Gale McGhee (D-WY) conceded, because of Fortas. 'Had there been no Fortas affair ... a man of Justice [sic] Haynsworth's attainments ... undoubtedly would have been confirmed.' "

Why does Brooks get his history wrong? Because he is eager to find ammunition in history for his view that Roe should be overturned.

If he wants to argue that courts shouldn't have gotten involved with abortion--ok. It's not my view but it's defensible.

If he wants to argue that Roe left a bad taste in many peoples' mouths. Ok. So did Brown. And many scholars today like Mike Klarman argue that Brown was a mistake for the same reason Brooks says that Roe was: It removed an issue that should have been settled democratically from debate, leading inevitably to backlash politics.

But he can't argue that before Roe we lived in a kind of golden age. It's simply not true.

Posted by Editor at [3:27 PM](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

Monday, April 18, 2005

So Who's the Radical?

Headline over Bob Herbert's column (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/18/opinion/18herbert.html?>) in the NYT today:

A RADICAL IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Naturally, I figured Herbert was bashing Bush today. But it turned out he was writing in praise of FDR, whom he describes as a radical.

I am not sure that radical is the right word for FDR. Most often he was quite modest in his approach. He never gave up his fear of deficit spending and every time the economy got going he would cut back on spending. Before Pearl Harbor, still worried about the attraction of isolationism to millions of Americans, he was said to be the last person in the administration to decide that we would have to resist the Nazis.

Yes, as Herbert observes, FDR sounded idealistic notes and proposed an economic bill of rights that to our ears sounds downright radical. But given the context of the times his economic bill of rights was not perceived as radical.

President Bush on the other hand often is radical. His tax plan was radical in 2001. His Social Security plan in 2005 is radical.

Do Americans want radicalism in a president? Bush got his tax cuts. He appears unable to win his Social Security "reform."

I think that fundamentally the American people are not radical. Indeed, they are downright conservative most of the time and under most circumstances. The tax cuts got through not because they were radical and Americans found a radical program appealing, but because they did not seem radical. Through clever marketing and precisely timed sunset provisions designed to minimize the impact of the cuts on the federal budget they seemed, in comparison to the large numbers thrown around by Greenspan and others regarding the expected surpluses, almost prudent.

Bush's Social Security plans, however, have seemed radical. Bush has made no attempt to make them seem conservative. He seems to have made the calculation that the only way he can get his measure passed is by creating a crisis-atmosphere that makes people think that we MUST ACT NOW OR FACE DOOM. (This strategy may sound familiar. It is the strategy he has employed to great effect in the war on terrorism. But in this case he doesn't have the pictures of burning 9-11 buildings to play off of.)

His approach is therefore a serious miscalculation and will, I suspect, lead to defeat.

Interestingly, it is usually the Democrats who frighten the American people with utopian plans. But this time it's the Republicans. It's 1964 all over again. Bush may be more palatable than Goldwater personally. But he is inviting a harsh response with his radical talk.

The strategy of the Democrats then should be to emphasize that they want to conserve the program while the Republicans want to try a radical experiment.

Simple strategy. Now let's see if the Democrats have the wit to adopt it.

Posted by Editor at 3:02 PM | Comments (0)

Friday, April 15, 2005

Tom Friedman's Terror Prediction

In the NYT the other day Tom Friedman worried out loud that the terrorists who hate us are going to want to strike us at home now that we appear to be winning in Iraq. Unable to beat us in Iraq, they will be inclined to inflict a humiliating punishment on us to cover their own defeat.

Maybe he's right. Maybe not. It's as plausible a theory as any I've heard. But of course we don't really know what the terrorists are thinking, do we?

Trying to guess what they are thinking is the job of the CIA.

We would do well to focus on something else, I'd suggest. And that is trying to figure out how to drive a wedge between terrorists and the broader Muslim community of the Middle East.

That should be the top priority of the American government in foreign policy.

And the one thing I worry about is this. Is it likely we can achieve this goal as long as we have a largely Christian army in the middle of the largely Muslim Middle East?

Not bloody likely.

Posted by Editor at 1:40 PM | Comments (1)

Monday, April 11, 2005

God's Wrath

Having just finished U.S. Grant's memoirs, I have a question. Would it be so bad if presidents nowadays followed the example of Lincoln, Grant and others, who willingly admitted that America has made mistakes and that sometimes we have to pay for our mistakes?

Americans don't have much of a sense of history. We like to think that we are not hobbled by history. We believe after all that The End of History came in 1776 when we broke away from Old

Europe.

But in the 19th century presidents regularly subscribed in public to the view that events in the past actually have an effect on the present and the future. Lincoln in his Second Inaugural famously explained that it may be that the Civil War may not end "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." Grant in his memoirs, echoing Lincoln, and like him, borrowing heavily from the Christian theology of penance, argued that the Civil War in part was the price America paid for the unlawful Mexican-American War, in which the stronger power took advantage of the weaker one to obtain territory.

If we cannot own up to our history anymore I'd settle for just a little Christian penance. In a country now dominated by leaders who either profess to believe in Christianity or who lead a flock who do, a brief bow to history might not seem out of line. Or is Christianity today just about megachurches, building the base, running off gays, and ending abortions?

If that's it, then Lincoln would hardly recognize the religion.

If penance is important, then perhaps we could begin to come to terms with the legacy of American foreign policy. Iran, I see, is back on the front burner. Might we not want to accept that many of the events that have taken place in Iran over the last 30 years had their roots in what happened 50 years ago?

I say this not in the expectation or the hope that Americans will begin flagellating themselves like the Shiites of Iran. But remembering is important. For even if we don't remember other people do.

Posted by Editor at [4:44 PM](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

Thursday, April 7, 2005

The Pope and Presidents

Just how important a role have popes played in the history of the American presidency? Not much for most of our history apparently.

The Messages and Papers of the Presidents, a series published by the United States government, covers all the official papers of presidents from Washington to Wilson.

The 18 volume set includes nearly 10,000 pages of closely printed text. The pope is mentioned just once, in a footnote.

Posted by Editor at [3:53 PM](#) | [Comments \(12\)](#)

David Brooks Is Right

David Brooks is right. In a column in the [NYT](#) the other day he observed that liberals generally are indifferent to debates about public philosophy. He recalled that a year ago he had phoned "the head of a prominent liberal think tank to ask him who his favorite philosopher was. If I'd asked about health care, he could have given me four hours of brilliant conversation, but on this subject he stumbled and said he'd call me back. He never did."

How would I have answered if Brooks had asked me? I have found myself wondering about this since reading his column. The first and only name that keeps coming to mind is Walter Lippmann. In high school and college I read all his books, devouring *The Public Philosophy*, *Drift and Mastery*, and *Shield of the Republic*, among others.

But I realized after thinking about this for awhile that it was a conservative who introduced me to Lippmann. In high school I had three history teachers: Mr. Ahearn, Mr. Asher and Mr. Okkema.

Mr. Ahearn was the department liberal, a good Irish-American New Dealer who celebrated decency and treated his students with decency. He had a distinct liberal approach to life but never talked about philosophy.

Mr. Asher was rumored to be a communist. A conservative member of the school board had even tried to get him fired. He taught Afro-American history and sociology. He too had a distinct approach to life but didn't talk about philosophy, perhaps because he didn't want to admit his affinity for Marxism.

Then there was Milo Okkema. Mr. Okkema was a somewhat intimidating person. He was formal. He was a hard grader. He demanded a lot from his students. And he never kidded around. In his classroom nothing less than the fate of civilization always seemed to be at stake. Many students behind his back badmouthed him. He wasn't a pal like so many other teachers. And he didn't

want to be your pal.

He was very conservative. He defended the Vietnam War (this was in the late 60s early 70s). He ran a Great Books club because he believed in a traditional 19th century education rooted in the study of the ancients. And he was very religious.

He had a great impact on students who liked him and let him into their world. For several years I considered myself a conservative because of him. I even attended a summer school run by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. In my spare time I read Russell Kirk and other conservatives.

While I long ago abandoned the conservative positions I took in high school under the influence of Milo Okkema, I never stopped thinking about the world in the terms he laid out. Fundamentally, they were conservative terms. Liberals, he argued take a mechanistic approach to life, conservatives an organic approach. Conservatives believe that society changes little, human nature tends toward evil, realism is vital. When George W. Bush began talking about remaking Iraq society I cringed. His was a hopelessly liberal scheme that would probably come to no good as it was based on a mechanistic assumption that if you gave people the vote they instantly would become good citizens.

A great deal of Mr. Okkema's philosophy came from Lippmann, whose quotes he hung on the walls of the classroom. They spoke of history, tradition, memory. Like Lippmann, I have gone through my own evolution. He started out as a liberal backer of Woodrow Wilson with faith in the people and ended up a conservative who had little faith in the people. I started out as a conservative who didn't doubt the wisdom of the people (probably because as a high school student I simply imbibed the American rah-rah myth that the people are the fountain of wisdom) and ended up as a liberal who now shares his doubts about the people.

Liberals I encountered in college and afterward seldom seemed interested in philosophy, as Brooks astutely observed. But the conservatives always were. I am not sure why this is so. But unlike Brooks, I don't think this is a reason for liberalism's failures today. Liberals lacked a philosophical approach to life even when they were in the saddle. Philosophical questions just don't preoccupy liberals anymore than they do Americans generally.

I for one am grateful however that I was exposed to a conservative like Milo Okkema when I was in school. If David Brooks calls me up and asks who my favorite philosopher is I won't have to put him on hold. I'll answer, thanks to Milo Okkema: Walter Lippmann.

Posted by Editor at [12:12 PM](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#)

Monday, April 4, 2005

Picking a Pope

From what I am learning about the selection of a Pope, it would appear that the process is quite similar to our selection of presidents.

In the early 19th century!

It's not very democratic, but at least it results in the selection of a leader on the basis of his resume, the interests of the institution he serves, and his overall philosophy and agenda.

We used to elect presidents this way. Party bosses convening at a conclave (aka: a political convention) and selected a leader from among the people they knew.

One didn't always get a leader who was able or visionary. But at least the process was rational--unlike the process we currently employ which can put a senator with just 5 years experience as a leader in serious contention for a nomination (Edwards). Or which can emphasize to the exclusion of most else soundbites and hair.

Ah, but the Catholic Church isn't a democracy and America is.

All hail democracy!

I'm kidding in my sarcasm. All should hail democracy. But we should also recognize its limits.

Posted by Editor at [6:12 PM](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Wednesday, March 23, 2005

George Woodrow Wilson Bush

I was reading H.W. Brands's little biography of Woodrow Wilson last night. Since Bush often sounds so much like Wilson--and acts like him, too, in his willingness to send troops to countries to make them reform--I thought it would be useful to read up on Wilson.

Brands makes an interesting observation with some relevance to Bush. Brands describes Wilson as being almost wholly ignorant about foreign affairs when he became president. He had rarely traveled abroad. He was unconcerned with foreign affairs. He expected and wanted to be a domestic president. He famously said that it would be the height of irony if he found himself preoccupied with foreign policy.

Sound familiar? But it gets better.

Brands says that in the absence of real knowledge about the world Wilson fell back on a kind of primitive moralizing as a guide to action.

This is downright scary in the parallel to Bush, isn't it?

The book came out in June 2003. So it is possible that Brands was deliberately intending his book as a warning about Bush. And the book is part of the series edited by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., so it wouldn't be surprising to discover that it included a subtle attack on Bush, whom Schlesinger openly disdains.

But all the same--hasn't Brands got a point worth pondering?

Posted by Editor at [12:37 PM](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#)