

January 8, 2015

Jennifer Rubin posts on our "feckless" Cuba policy. Feckless gets tossed around a lot when thinking of this administration. The word is defined thus; weak, ineffective worthless, irresponsible. Fits perfectly.

... In a letter to the president today Rubio observed, "While I believe that the entirety of your new Cuba policy is overwhelmingly one-sided in the Castro regime's favor and based on the flawed premise that giving it more legitimacy and money will result in a freer Cuban people, the least your Administration can do now is hold the regime accountable for fully freeing these 53 political prisoners as well as those who have been detained in recent weeks." He urged the administration to "to cancel the travel of Administration officials to Cuba to further discuss the normalization of diplomatic relations at least until all 53 political prisoners, plus those arrested since your December 17th announcement, have been released and are no longer subjected to repression that often takes the form of house arrests, aggressive surveillance, denied Internet access, forced exile and other forms of harassment."

With answers like the ones given by the State Department on Monday, I see no chance of any ambassador to Cuba being confirmed or any change in U.S. law getting through Congress. This is another instance of weakness and embarrassing lack of diplomatic prowess. Congress should do nothing to enable the administration's folly.

Craig Pirrong posts on the continuing decline of commodity prices. He sees the cause as weak Chinese demand and notes that traders are trying to discern Chinese intent.

... Commodity traders want to know. But given the opacity of the Chinese decision making process, it's impossible to know. The signals are very, very mixed. No doubt there is a raging debate going on within the leadership now, and between the center and the periphery, and decisions are zinging and zagging along with that debate.

I see three alternatives, two of which are commodity bearish. First, there is a transition to a more consumption-based model: this would lead to a decline in commodity demand. Second, there is a crash or hard landing as the credit boom implodes due to the underperformance of past investments: definitely bearish for commodities. Third, the Chinese keep pumping the credit, thereby keeping commodity demand alive. The third alternative only delays the inevitable choice between Options One and Two.

In brief, for the foreseeable future, the most important factor in commodity markets will be what goes on in Chinese policymaking circles. And insofar as that goes, your guess is as good as mine.

Mark Steyn is profiled and his new book is reviewed in Canada's National Post.

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He's a tough and uncompromising critic of everybody from political leaders to folk singers. He thinks the invention of the "faux-folk song" helped infantilize American culture. The folk songs are "nursery-school jingles, which is why they're so insidious." In another mood Steyn includes a marvelous magazine piece, "Moon River and Me," a subtle evocation of the power of popular song and the best appreciation of Johnny Mercer's great lyrics that I've ever read.

When growing anti-Semitism in the Arab states is the subject (as it often is these days) Steyn expresses his sympathy through a sharp and utterly unsentimental example. He mentions that in the 1920s a Jew was finance minister of Egypt. That man's descendants now live in France — not just because a Jew in Egypt can no longer be finance minister but because "a Jew in Egypt can no longer be."

When people praise H.L. Mencken, they often say we need someone like him in our time. Steyn is far from an echo of Mencken —for one thing, he has none of the ugly prejudices. But he's the only writer today who sometimes brings the best of Mencken to mind.

Andy Malcolm didn't think much of Gohmert's challenge to Boehner.

The 114th Congress opens today with Republicans in full control for the first time since George W. Bush was hated.

Obama and Harry Reid can't face the trans-continental rejection of their policies and procedures by midterm voters. But with that resounding voter endorsement producing an historic House majority and a workable Senate one, the GOP has a golden chance to show its governing prowess in these 670 days until the presidential election.

So, what does a clownish, rump posse of disgruntled House conservatives do? It launches a very public, very hopeless bid to thwart the will of colleagues, who already voted, and oust John Boehner as speaker.

Ah, that's just what the media loves to cover -- old conservative white guys squabbling over political spoils before they do a lick of work, if that's what members of Congress do for their \$172K.

Now, Boehner is a pragmatic politician. He's nowhere near as openly conservative and confrontational as some vocal ideological purists. He doesn't grandstand with long-winded denunciations that get tribe members in war paint all excited while Americans silently think, "WTH?"

A lot of people are unhappy with Boehner's un-rabid demeanor. When hyperbolic Boehner critics say there's no difference between him and the Dems, refresh your mental screen with the image of Nancy Pelosi. She engineered ObamaCare's passage without reading it. ...

But, Kevin Williamson did.

... Will Rogers famously joked: "I don't belong to any organized political party — I'm a Democrat," and there has long been a great deal of self-congratulatory myth-making among Democrats about the freewheeling nature of their party and the array of independent minds that compose it. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth: Congressional Republicans are in fact more likely to buck their leadership, and to vote against the majority of their party, than are Democrats. The Republican

party is mainly organized by ideology; the Democratic party is mainly organized by the bundling of special interests — the Teamsters and the people who demand federal subsidies for sex-change operations are not obvious policy allies, but the Democrats offer sops to both, so they work together.

The Republicans, and conservatives at large, are a fractious bunch because values play a more outsize role in Republican politics than in Democratic politics. Republican voters are jurors weighing the evidence and deciding whether Boehner et al. should be charged with the felony of being too soft. Democrats are horse-traders, and they'll stomach Barack Obama's stand against gay marriage if they think that they can get something (e.g., federalized health care) out of it — or if they think he's insincere, which is generally a safe bet.

Louie Gohmert probably should not be the speaker of the House. But his unsuccessful run was nonetheless a good thing for the party — a much better thing than the brute-force display of the Republican leaders who leaned on representatives who might otherwise have cast a protest vote — or more than that — for Gohmert. Papering over philosophical and political differences through a show of official might by the Republican leadership will not make the disputes within the party go away — it will only cause them to fester.

Tuesday was an excellent day to have that fight. Wednesday, it is time for a different one.

Here's some fun as Jonathan Tobin posts on the Harvard profs who are upset about the costs of affordable health care.

Liberal academics have always been among those who have been the most ardent supporters of ObamaCare. But the Harvard faculty is now discovering the joys of ObamaCare and, as the New York Times reports, are no more pleased with it than many other Americans. That this same group, many of whose members played prominent roles in promoting the passage of the Affordable Care Act, should now be experiencing its problems is cold comfort to fellow sufferers. But the outrage that Harvard professors are venting about being asked to pay more for fewer benefits is a delightful example of liberal hypocrisy at its worst.

The Harvard story is yet another example of the basic political problem with the ACA. Prior to its implementation, both its supporters and many of its critics believed that once in force it would become as popular as Social Security or Medicare and become politically untouchable. But that failed to take into account the fact that unlike those venerable government benefit programs that are viewed as harming no one (except, perhaps, the taxpayers of the future), ObamaCare is a scheme that creates winners and losers. ...

... We may well mock liberals like the denizens of Harvard's faculty lounges who blithely support huge changes that aimed at social transformation yet believed they could keep their own "Cadillac plans" without higher costs. But the problem here is that the entire nation was sold a bill of goods and is now being forced to swallow a bad deal in order to achieve gains that may not be commensurate with the pain that comes with them. That is why those who still blithely assume that the debate about this law is over are dead wrong.

Jim Taranto has fun too.

In one of his best-known aphorisms, the late William F. Buckley is reputed to have said that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 people listed in the Boston phone book than by the faculty of Harvard. Although Buckley was famously a Yale man, this is generally understood to have been an expression of antielitist sentiment rather than intraleague antipathy.

But the New York Times reports that the Harvard faculty is unhappy about being governed by the Harvard faculty. Its headline, “Harvard Ideas on Health Care Hit Home, Hard,” invokes with irony not Buckley but Mencken: “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.” (We used the quote in 2012, in a not-unrelated context.)

“The professors are in an uproar,” the Times tells us, because ideas hatched by “Harvard’s experts on health economics and policy” are now being “applied to the Harvard faculty” thanks to ObamaCare. ...

Right Turn

Our feckless Cuba policy

by Jennifer Rubin

There is nothing like a State Department briefing to reveal how utterly feckless the Obama administration's foreign policy is. Consider this [exchange](#) on Monday:

QUESTION: Under the Administration's deal to normalize relations with the Castro regime, 53 Cuban political prisoners are set to be released. Do we know who they are and where they are now?

MS. [JEN] PSAKI: Well, when the announcement was made in December, of course, the United States shared the names of individuals jailed in Cuba on charges related to their political activities. We're not going to outline who those individuals were. We shared them with the Cuban Government. Obviously, it's a topic that we will remain engaged with them with, but I don't expect we'll be releasing a public list.

QUESTION: There's a prominent dissident group in Cuba, the Ladies in White; they've been protesting the new policy. And they say the list is so secretive that no one knows who's on there. Is there a lack of transparency?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we know who's on there, and the Cuban Government knows who's on there, and we've given a specific number. Obviously, there are a range of steps that both sides will need to continue to work together to take over the coming weeks. One of the reasons why we felt so strongly about changing our policy is that this – the old policy was not just broken on the economic front, but it was making it impossible for civil society and people to operate and kind of live and communicate in Cuba. So there's a range of benefits, not just the release of the prisoners, which, obviously, we see as something that's positive and we'll continue to discuss and press; but there are other steps that will help, I think, groups like you mentioned, and we think it will take some time but over the coming months.

QUESTION: Jen, are you saying that you don't – you cannot confirm if Cuba has actually released a single one of these 53?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything to confirm for you publicly, no. . . .

QUESTION: So you know that they have not been released. Is that what you're saying?

MS. PSAKI: That's not what I'm saying. I will see if there's more – anything more publicly we can share.

QUESTION: It would seem to me that if you come out and announce that the Cubans have agreed to free 53, then you should be able to say whether or not you know that the 53 have actually been released or not. That would seem –

MS. PSAKI: It's always easier for me when we can provide more details publicly, as you know, but I will see if there's more we can provide.

QUESTION: Right. Do you know if there has been a date yet set for the migration/beginning of normalization talks that Assistant Secretary Jacobson is going to go to Havana for?

MS. PSAKI: Well, they're likely to happen later this month. I think we're still working on finalizing the dates. Hopefully, we'll have that in the coming days.

QUESTION: And the recent arrests and then releases and re-arrests of dissidents, despite the promise to free 53 political prisoners, won't have any effect on the timing of that or on the entire idea of normalization, or will it?

MS. PSAKI: Well, obviously, I mean, as I mentioned, I mean, one of the reasons why we moved forward with the change in policy is because we want to empower Cuban citizens to give them greater ability to promote positive change going forward. And a critical focus of our announced actions include continued strong focus on improved human rights conditions, of which we know that the situation in Cuba remains poor. There are limits on fundamental freedoms. There are – including freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. This will certainly be part of our ongoing dialogue.

QUESTION: Right. But –

MS. PSAKI: But no, it hasn't impacted the timing of the next round of discussions, no.

QUESTION: Well, the problem that I'm having with this, though, is that you say that the last 50 years of policy has been broken because it didn't do anything. But then you announce that it's changed, and within a week or two weeks of the announcement that you're going to change your – fundamentally change, alter the relationship that you've had with Cuba, not only can you not confirm that the 53 people that they said they would – the political prisoners – said that they would release, you can't confirm that they have been released; but one of the very first things the Cubans do afterwards is continue to arrest dissidents. So if the policy was broken for 50 years, the change in policy doesn't seem to have fixed it.

MS. PSAKI: Well, Matt, our view was never that the changes would take place and be implemented with a matter – in a matter of weeks. This has, as you noted, been decades of a broken policy.

QUESTION: Yeah. But –

MS. PSAKI: It's going to take a long time to change it.

QUESTION: Okay, all right. So is the release of the 53 confirmable publicly from you a prerequisite for Assistant Secretary Jacobson going down there and having these talks to start normalization?

MS. PSAKI: A prerequisite? No, this is a –

QUESTION: So the Cubans don't have to actually –

MS. PSAKI: These are –

QUESTION: – do anything?

MS. PSAKI: Matt, no. This is something they have agreed to. I would point you to them for any updates on the number of people or if people have been released. There are migration talks that have been scheduled for some time. Obviously, this is a different, a unique – or not unique, but a different set of circumstances given the announcements in December.

The back-and-forth went on for some time, but you get the drift. We gave the Castro regime everything it wanted, namely normalization and got nothing whatsoever in return and cannot even claim to have secured the release of 53 prisoners that was supposed to be part of the initial deal. It's hard to say whether Cuba is in violation of any understanding since the administration was determined to ask nothing of the Cubans.

When asked about statements from Sens. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) vowing to block confirmation of an ambassador, Psaki responded, “I think most people would agree that what the Interests Section now – does now and the U.S. embassy would do in the future is critically important for Americans and Cubans alike. It includes things like uncensored internet access. It includes visas for thousands of Cubans every year, nonimmigrant visas for many thousands, immigrant visas for 20,000 Cubans a year. U.S. engagement will be critical when appropriate and will include continued strong support for improved human rights conditions, as I've outlined. So we'll let the process play out. Obviously, we'll make a strong case for why a change in our presence there is warranted.” Well, that should be enlightening.

In a letter to the president today Rubio observed, “While I believe that the entirety of your new Cuba policy is overwhelmingly one-sided in the Castro regime’s favor and based on the flawed premise that giving it more legitimacy and money will result in a freer Cuban people, the least your Administration can do now is hold the regime accountable for fully freeing these 53 political prisoners as well as those who have been detained in recent weeks.” He urged the administration to “to cancel the travel of Administration officials to Cuba to further discuss the normalization of diplomatic relations at least until all 53 political prisoners, plus those arrested since your December 17th announcement, have been released and are no longer subjected to repression that often takes the form of house arrests, aggressive surveillance, denied Internet access, forced exile and other forms of harassment.”

With answers like the ones given by the State Department on Monday, I see no chance of any ambassador to Cuba being confirmed or any change in U.S. law getting through Congress. This is another instance of weakness and embarrassing lack of diplomatic prowess. Congress should do nothing to enable the administration’s folly.

Streetwise Professor

Whither Chinese Commodity Demand? Your Guess Is As Good As Mine

by Craig Pirrong

Commodities are down broadly: Oil gets the headlines, but most major commodities—especially industrial commodities—are down, with iron ore leading the pack. The main driver is Chinese demand: perhaps it's more accurate to say that the main brake is slackening Chinese demand. Forecasting the course of future Chinese demand is challenging, because there is a huge political component to it.

China has long followed a commodity-intensive, investment-focused (including construction and infrastructure), credit-fueled economic model. It has long been recognized that this model is unsustainable because it is fraught with imbalances. There have been signs that China has recognized this, and in particular the new Xi government is attempting to navigate this transition, signaling a desire to transform to a consumption-based model with growth rates in the 6-7 percent range rather than 10 percent (though analysts like Michael Pettis say that growth rates in the 3-4 percent range are more realistic.)

One sign of that is the central government's recent attempts to rein in local governments that borrowed heavily through "local government funding vehicles" ("LGFVs") to support local infrastructure, housing construction, and industry. Clamping down on LGFVs would be one way of steering China's economy away from the investment-intensive model:

China's local government bond issuers face judgment day as authorities in the world's second-largest economy decide which debt they will or won't support.

Borrowing costs soared by a record amount last month before today's deadline for classifying liabilities, on speculation some local government financing vehicles will lose government support after the finance ministry starts reviewing regional authorities' debt reports. Yield premiums on one-year AA notes, the most common ranking for such issuers, jumped a record 98 basis points in December.

Premier Li Keqiang has stepped up curbs on local borrowings just as LGFVs prepare to repay 558.7 billion yuan (\$89.8 billion) of bonds this year amid economic growth that's set for the slowest pace in more than two decades. The yield on the 2018 notes of Xinjiang Shihezi Development Zone Economic Construction Co., a financing arm in a northwestern city with 620,000 people, climbed a record 63 basis points in December.

But there are mixed signals. Today China announced a \$1 trillion stimulus:

China is accelerating 300 infrastructure projects valued at 7 trillion yuan (\$1.1 trillion) this year as policy makers seek to shore up growth that's in danger of slipping below 7 percent.

Premier Li Keqiang's government approved the projects as part of a broader 400-venture, 10 trillion yuan plan to run from late 2014 through 2016, said people familiar with the matter who asked not to be identified as the decision wasn't public.

....

The projects will be funded by the central and local governments, state-owned firms, loans and the private sector, said the people. The investment will be in seven industries including oil and gas pipelines, health, clean energy, transportation and mining, according to the people. They said the NDRC is also studying projects in other industries in case the government needs to provide more support for growth.

The NDRC's spokesman, Li Pumin, said last month China would encourage investment in those areas.

So which is it? A transition to a less-investment intensive model, implemented in large part by reducing the use of credit by local governments? Or continuing the old model, to the tune of \$1 trillion over the next couple of years?

Commodity traders want to know. But given the opacity of the Chinese decision making process, it's impossible to know. The signals are very, very mixed. No doubt there is a raging debate going on within the leadership now, and between the center and the periphery, and decisions are zigging and zagging along with that debate.

I see three alternatives, two of which are commodity bearish. First, there is a transition to a more consumption-based model: this would lead to a decline in commodity demand. Second, there is a crash or hard landing as the credit boom implodes due to the underperformance of past investments: definitely bearish for commodities. Third, the Chinese keep pumping the credit, thereby keeping commodity demand alive. The third alternative only delays the inevitable choice between Options One and Two.

In brief, for the foreseeable future, the most important factor in commodity markets will be what goes on in Chinese policymaking circles. And insofar as that goes, your guess is as good as mine.

National Post

The world according to Steyn

by Robert Fulford

Mark Steyn is a phenomenon of English-language journalism, a writer unlike any other, a commentator with a luxuriously original spirit.

In the journalism of Canada, America, Britain and several other countries, he follows his own rules and makes his own noise, as most *National Post* readers know by now. He's often seen as a conservative political writer, a self-described "right-wing bastard," but he's just as fascinated by cultural and social affairs. His new book of collected writings from recent decades, *The [Un]documented Mark Steyn: Don't Say You Weren't Warned* (Regnery), emphasizes the cultural side.

Steyn began in Canada, spent long enough in Britain to let English journalism seep into his style, and now spends much of his time in the U.S. His careful observation of American life has brought him to a grim (for a conservative) conclusion: "You can't have a conservative government in a liberal culture."

Schools in the U.S. are liberal and churches are liberal, he argues. The hip, groovy elite is liberal. Makers of movies and pop songs are liberal. Liberalism fills the air; it is the climate.

Culture trumps politics, and in his view the US proves it. “Liberals expend tremendous effort changing the culture. Conservatives expend tremendous effort changing elected officials every other November — and then are surprised that it doesn’t make much difference.”

As a result, conservatives are always trying to catch up, “twisting themselves into pretzels to explain why gay marriage is really conservative after all, or why 30 million unskilled immigrants are ‘natural allies’ of the Republican Party.”

His book takes us through folk songs and pop songs, Viagra, the Rushdie fatwa, Monica Lewinsky’s famous dress, Starbucks and many another cultural or politically cultural sensation.

He’s a virtuoso of the unexpected connection, the comparison that makes us see something freshly. When he considers Viagra on the one hand and cosmetic surgery on the other, he finds himself “Contemplating a society in which artificially aroused men pursue ever more artificially enhanced women.” Something (the culture, probably) has caused us to complicate unnecessarily the nature of sexual desire.

Steyn has a way of taking people seriously even when their opinions are fatuous — especially opinions on culture, which has a way of encouraging foolishness in just about everyone. When he shows no interest in Starbucks, a friend suggests he doesn’t understand coffee culture.

“What culture?” asks Steyn. “The coffee houses of 17th-century England were hives of business. They spawned the Stock Exchange and Lloyd’s of London. The coffee houses of 18th-century Paris were hives of ideas: Voltaire, Rousseau and the gang met to thrash out the Enlightenment.” What have the coffee houses of 21st-century America spawned? “The gingerbread eggnog machiato and an accompanying CD compilation.”

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IBD

What's Louie Gohmert's real problem winning with John Boehner?

by Andy Malcolm

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Boehner notes Congress' approval rating way up there at 14%, less than a third of flailing Obama. Boehner's made the symbolic, futile try at repealing ObamaCare parts -- *what?* -- three dozen times.

Under his leadership the House passed nearly 400 common-sense conservative bills that Harry Reid so feared he wouldn't even bring them up in the Senate, lest Democrats reveal their true colors. That worked well. Ask Begich, Pryor, Hagan, Udall, Landrieu.

Voters saw through that obstruction and Harry now sits powerless for two years until Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval shoos him into a retirement home.

But Boehner was out there all fall quietly fundraising and campaigning to enlarge Republicans' already dominant majority to the largest in almost nine decades. Give us a chance, he told the country, and we'll show you how conservatives can govern. Even in a divided government. They looked at Reid diddling and Obama blaming, fundraising and golfing. And they bought it.

Boehner won. A repeat of his midterm leadership victory in 2010. Which pretty much blows up the argument that more Boehner equals disaster. And his grateful members -- sorry, pollsters, the only folks who matter in choosing speakers -- re-elected him in their November caucus.

Here's how you know this coffee klatsch 'rebellion' is built on sheer self-interest: [Not one but two alternatives](#) to Boehner: Louie Gohmert and Ted Yoho.

Gohmert announced his tardy candidacy two days ago on one of those dying Sunday talk shows where D.C. insiders talk at each other about the America they fly over. Like most Americans, you may have missed it.

Louie and Ted and their ilk are important to the conservative conscience. But they should read a little history. Gohmert says Boehner has broken promises -- as opposed to, say, the Democrat PINO in the White House? Republicans get in trouble (as in, losing) when they fight each other over perpetual political purity.

In 1912, when Teddy Roosevelt, as a Progressive, split the Republican vote with William Howard Taft, giving us Woodrow Wilson and the income tax. In 1964, which gave us Lyndon Johnson, more Vietnam war and Goldwater losing 44 states. In 1976, when Gerry Ford pardoned Nixon and wasn't conservative enough, giving us Jimmy Carter.

And in 1992, when George H.W. Bush broke his reckless no-new taxes vow and Ross Perot settled an old Texas tribal feud, giving us eight years of a Clinton -- and now maybe more.

Mitch McConnell is the new Senate majority leader. If he and Rand Paul can work together, anything is possible. Here's how McConnell looks at 2016:

"I don't want the American people to think that if they add a Republican president to a Republican Congress, that's going to be a scary outcome. I want the American people to be comfortable with the fact that the Republican House and Senate is a responsible, right-of-center, governing majority."

Now, McConnell certainly isn't exciting. Neither is Boehner. I don't want exciting legislators, just like I don't want exciting airline pilots. Anybody else remember the excitement surrounding that new legislative face who talked so well back in 2007-08? Those promises. He got folks so excited that Oprah cried off her false eyelashes.

Anybody recall what we got for all that excitement? An ineffective, lazy, bloviating liar that we must endure for 744 more days.

So, maybe exciting rallies with chanting, angry rants and ideological blood screenings is not the best way to win in 2016. Isn't that what elections are all about -- Winning?

Maybe the best path for the country -- and the party -- is just doing the jobs they were elected to do. Pass a reasonable budget. Strengthen national defense or stop Obama's cuts. Begin a reasonable path to debt reduction. Work with Dems when possible. On Keystone, for example, and tax reform. Show the people what real government can do.

And trust in voters late next Leap Year to make a wise comparison between Republicans and Brand X. Do your job. And trust voters. It's such a crazy idea it just might work.

National Review

This Is Why We Have Elections

Gohmert vs. Boehner was a fight worth having.

by Kevin D. Williamson

Third verse, same as the first: When the Left loses, its habitual response is to delegitimize the winners. We see this all the time: So-called progressives fail at the talk-radio game, so talk radio becomes categorically disreputable in the Left-dominated popular culture. Fox News beats the other cable-news outlets like a team of rented mules, so Fox News must be wicked, dishonest, dishonorable — and if intellectually dishonest critics such as Jameson Parker have to lie to make that case stick, so be it. Republicans won big in the last election, and will be coming into Congress — and the state legislatures, and the governors' offices — in a very strong position, which means the Left wants to spend the next six months talking about whether Steve Scalise is a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer — he obviously is not — and applying Freudian analysis to Louie Gohmert's asparagus.

Conservatives bore each other to tears reciting the litany of double standards in American politics, but let's recall: The worst that Scalise is accused of is failing to sufficiently vet a group that invited him to speak. And yet we can expect endless headlines like this one over a predictably beef-witted Clarence Page column: "GOP can't shake David Duke. Does it want to?" David Duke, the nobody ex-Klanster who is relevant to the national conversation only as a media-sustained grotesque, in fact spent a large part of his political career as an active Democrat, from the 1972 New Orleans riot to his unsuccessful run in the 1988 Democratic presidential primary. Think about that: David Duke's aim in 1988 was to unseat Ronald Reagan, but he's a Republican problem? While Duke was seeking the Democratic nomination, the Senate majority leader — a Democrat — was none other than Robert K. Byrd, who rejoiced in the title "Exalted Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan." Duke was such a reviled figure among Republicans that a sitting president, George H. W. Bush, and a former president, Ronald Reagan, both took the unusual step of making endorsements on behalf of his opponent in a state-legislature race. But never mind. It's a useful story for the Clarence Pages of the world who, like antibiotic-resistant syphilis, shall always be with us.

Louie Gohmert, who was the headline of the day when unsuccessfully challenging John Boehner for the House speakership, sometimes says odd and embarrassing things, and those are used to tar Republicans as a group. Democrats such as Hank Johnson of Georgia can wonder aloud whether sending additional military personnel to Guam puts the island at risk of capsizing; his predecessor in office, Democrat Cynthia McKinney, a 9/11 truther and friend of anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers, once opined that "Zionists" had cost her two elections — and if you're wondering what she meant by "Zionists," her father, also a Democratic legislator, helpfully explained at the time: "Jews have bought everybody. Jews. J-E-W-S."

Spelling it out is a nice touch.

By way of comparison, Gohmert's oddball expressions — "casting aspersions on my asparagus," etc. — and his occasionally daft enthusiasms are pretty tame stuff.

I am of the view — intensely unpopular among many conservatives — that John Boehner has been a pretty good speaker, that his is a nearly impossible job, and that 99 percent of those who

castigate him as a weakling and a sellout — officeholders and free-range critics alike — could not hope to perform half as well as he has. But Gohmert's challenge was nonetheless welcome.

This is why we have elections — to choose representatives. The 2014 congressional elections were quite good for conservatives, who are restive and impatient for reform. Many of them fault congressional leaders, especially John Boehner and Senate leader Mitch McConnell, for being too eager to compromise and too generous in their terms. There might have been a mutiny against McConnell if all the likely candidates for Senate majority leader — Senators Rubio, Paul, Cruz, etc. — weren't running for president.

Will Rogers famously joked: "I don't belong to any organized political party — I'm a Democrat," and there has long been a great deal of self-congratulatory myth-making among Democrats about the freewheeling nature of their party and the array of independent minds that compose it. In fact, the opposite is closer to the truth: Congressional Republicans are in fact more likely to buck their leadership, and to vote against the majority of their party, than are Democrats. The Republican party is mainly organized by ideology; the Democratic party is mainly organized by the bundling of special interests — the Teamsters and the people who demand federal subsidies for sex-change operations are not obvious policy allies, but the Democrats offer sops to both, so they work together.

The Republicans, and conservatives at large, are a fractious bunch because values play a more outsize role in Republican politics than in Democratic politics. Republican voters are jurors weighing the evidence and deciding whether Boehner et al. should be charged with the felony of being too soft. Democrats are horse-traders, and they'll stomach Barack Obama's stand against gay marriage if they think that they can get something (e.g., federalized health care) out of it — or if they think he's insincere, which is generally a safe bet.

Louie Gohmert probably should not be the speaker of the House. But his unsuccessful run was nonetheless a good thing for the party — a much better thing than the brute-force display of the Republican leaders who leaned on representatives who might otherwise have cast a protest vote — or more than that — for Gohmert. Papering over philosophical and political differences through a show of official might by the Republican leadership will not make the disputes within the party go away — it will only cause them to fester.

Tuesday was an excellent day to have that fight. Wednesday, it is time for a different one.

Contentions

Harvard Prof Discover Joys of ObamaCare

by Jonathan S. Tobin

Liberal academics have always been among those who have been the most ardent supporters of ObamaCare. But the Harvard faculty is now discovering the joys of ObamaCare and, as the New York Times reports, are no more pleased with it than many other Americans. That this same group, many of whose members played prominent roles in promoting the passage of the Affordable Care Act, should now be experiencing its problems is cold comfort to fellow sufferers. But the outrage that Harvard professors are venting about being asked to pay more for fewer benefits is a delightful example of liberal hypocrisy at its worst.

The Harvard story is yet another example of the basic political problem with the ACA. Prior to its implementation, both its supporters and many of its critics believed that once in force it would become as popular as Social Security or Medicare and become politically untouchable. But that failed to take into account the fact that unlike those venerable government benefit programs that are viewed as harming no one (except, perhaps, the taxpayers of the future), ObamaCare is a scheme that creates winners and losers.

In the case of those who purchased their insurance on their own, we learned in the last year that President Obama's oft-repeated promise that consumers could keep their insurance policies and doctors if they liked them under the ACA was a lie. But the damage is not limited to those several million unhappy ObamaCare losers. As Harvard's faculty learned, the law will have a far-reaching impact even on those who are covered by large, successful employers like Harvard.

In the case of the university, the problem is the so-called "Cadillac tax" that penalizes those insurance plans that offer, as Harvard's previously did, high-quality benefits at reasonable prices. This tax penalizes consumers who have been able to acquire good plans in order to pay for all the free services that ObamaCare provides to less fortunate citizens, many millions of whom must be considered net winners from the law.

As the *Times* notes, the new Harvard plan is, in fact, far more generous than the sort of coverage people who buy ObamaCare policies online can expect. But it is not what Harvard employees are accustomed to receiving and they don't like it. If the university were to try and craft a plan that would limit health-care providers to only the cheapest available in the Boston area, they'd have to eliminate Harvard's own teaching hospitals, or "discourage their use" by those covered by the scheme.

But rather than meekly accept the higher costs for insurance as the price that must be paid for expanding society's social safety net, many of the same liberal Harvard faculty that helped sell the country on the ACA are now crying foul. They see the new reality as nothing less than a pay cut. One economics professor summed up the problem this way:

But Jerry R. Green, a professor of economics and a former provost who has been on the Harvard faculty for more than four decades, said the new out-of-pocket costs could lead people to defer medical care or diagnostic tests, causing more serious illnesses and costly complications in the future.

"It's equivalent to taxing the sick," Professor Green said. "I don't think there's any government in the world that would tax the sick."

Ah, but he's wrong there. By attempting to transform its health-care industry in this manner, the United States is seeking to make those middle-class consumers who sometimes get sick pay a lot more in order to provide coverage for those who are less wealthy. Like it or not, as Harvard teachers are learning, ObamaCare is Robin Hood-style leveling except the government is stealing from the middle class to give to the poor.

Some on the faculty are right to observe that it was unrealistic for pro-ObamaCare types like the Harvard faculty to imagine that they would be held exempt from being hurt by the ACA's mandates.

Meredith B. Rosenthal, a professor of health economics and policy at the Harvard School of Public Health, said she was puzzled by the outcry. "The changes in Harvard faculty benefits are parallel to changes that all Americans are seeing," she said. "Indeed, they have come to our front door much later than to others."

Yet even more to the point was another comment from a faculty member:

"It seems that Harvard is trying to save money by shifting costs to sick people," said Mary C. Waters, a professor of sociology. "I don't understand why a university with Harvard's incredible resources would do this. What is the crisis?"

Waters seems to be saying that Harvard is a rich enough institution that it should merely absorb the higher health-care costs caused by the ACA. But like any large company, even a non-profit with an enormous endowment, Harvard feels it must behave in the same fashion as the rest of the country and pass along the costs mandated by the ObamaCare tax. But the real disconnect is her failure to understand that the same argument—the lack of a genuine crisis creating a need for immediate and radical changes—was one that critics of the law rightly made before its passage.

It is true that many Americans benefit from the ACA. But as Harvard professors have now learned, the number of losers may well exceed those of the winners. In the process, a massive dislocation of one sixth of the nation's economy has occurred with even more trouble to come this year as the individual mandates go into effect, possibly sending rates skyrocketing and perhaps also negatively impacting employment figures at a time when the nation is hoping that a full recovery from the 2008 recession is finally taking place.

The point is the United States didn't have to turn its health-care system upside down while vastly increasing the power of the federal government in 2009 and 2010 when President Obama insisted that the Democratic Congress do just that. Measures that might have helped the nation recover should have been a higher priority. There were also possible fixes for the uninsured that didn't involve this sort of transformation. But the Democrats went ahead and passed this law on a narrow party-line vote even though they had little or no idea, as then House Speaker Nancy Pelosi admitted, what was in it.

But she wasn't the only one who didn't know what was coming. Most Americans, including many liberals who were among the most ardent backers of this scheme, had no idea that it would mean forcing them to pay more for health insurance and, unlike in the case of Harvard, often also mean that they would lose access to providers they were pleased with and policies that made sense for them.

We may well mock liberals like the denizens of Harvard's faculty lounges who blithely support huge changes that aimed at social transformation yet believed they could keep their own "Cadillac plans" without higher costs. But the problem here is that the entire nation was sold a bill of goods and is now being forced to swallow a bad deal in order to achieve gains that may not be commensurate with the pain that comes with them. That is why those who still blithely assume that the debate about this law is over are dead wrong.

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The Harvard faculty vs. the Boston phone book.

by James Taranto

In one of his best-known aphorisms, the late William F. Buckley is reputed to have said that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 people listed in the Boston phone book than by the

faculty of Harvard. Although Buckley was famously a Yale man, this is generally understood to have been an expression of antielitist sentiment rather than intraleague antipathy.

But the [New York Times](#) reports that the Harvard faculty is unhappy about being governed by the Harvard faculty. Its headline, “Harvard Ideas on Health Care Hit Home, Hard,” invokes with irony not Buckley but Mencken: “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard.” (We [used the quote](#) in 2012, in a not-unrelated context.)

“The professors are in an uproar,” the Times tells us, because ideas hatched by “Harvard’s experts on health economics and policy” are now being “applied to the Harvard faculty” thanks to ObamaCare.

“Members of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the heart of the 378-year-old university, voted overwhelmingly in November to oppose changes that would require them and thousands of other Harvard employees to pay more for health care,” the Times reports. It was as much in vain as the common people’s votes in 2010. ObamaCare is the law of the land even in Cambridge, Mass.

Some details:

In Harvard’s health care enrollment guide for 2015, the university said it “must respond to the national trend of rising health care costs, including some driven by health care reform,” in the form of the [Patient Protection and] Affordable Care Act. The guide said that Harvard faced “added costs” because of provisions in the health care law that extend coverage for children up to age 26, offer free preventive services like mammograms and colonoscopies and, starting in 2018, add a tax on high-cost insurance, known as the Cadillac tax.

The faculty’s reactions make for high comedy. Buckley’s successor [Rich Lowry](#) shows off his own erudition in responding to one prof’s laments:

Richard F. Thomas, a Virgil scholar, said the health-care changes are “deplorable.” (Quoth the poet, “Each of us bears his own Hell.”) They are “deeply regressive.” (“It never troubles the wolf how many the sheep be.”) And they are “a sign of the corporatization of the university.” (“O accursed hunger of gold, to what dost thou not compel human hearts!”)

We got a laugh out of the lament for “corporatization,” The President and Fellows of Harvard College, which oversees the university, was founded in 1650 and is also known as the [Harvard Corporation](#). But we suppose if you’re a Virgil scholar, that doesn’t qualify as ancient history.

Of historian Mary D. Lewis, described by the Times as having “led opposition to the benefit changes,” Lowry quips that she is “practically the Mitch McConnell of Harvard University. Let’s hope she has a plausible repeal-and-replace plan and isn’t merely campaigning on the power of sheer, nihilistic rejectionism.”

McConnell? Wouldn’t Ted Cruz be more like it? But don’t worry, Lowry also has a joke about Texas’ junior senator, who is also a Harvard Law grad.

Lewis, according to the Times, describes the benefit reductions as “tantamount to a pay cut.” The same misconception appears in a piece by Vox.com’s senior ObamaCare cheerleader [Sarah Kliff](#), Kliff scoffs at the profs; her title is “Harvard Professors Freak Out About Getting Slightly Less Excellent Health Insurance.” She concludes:

The health plan that Harvard professors really liked came at a price: the university spent more on benefits that it otherwise would have put towards other forms of compensation (i.e. salary). Those are real trade-offs—just ones that you, I, and apparently a number of Harvard professors aren't as aware are being made.

That is not untrue, except that one suspects Kliff is not actually ignorant of the matter about which she is lecturing the Harvard faculty. But it's beside the point. What's happening here is not that money is being freed up from benefits to be made available for higher salaries, as Kliff implies. Nor is it tantamount to a pay cut, as Lewis claims—at least not from the standpoint of her employer.

Rather, it is an increase in expenses, driven in substantial part by government policy. Employees' total compensation—salaries plus the cost to Harvard of providing benefits—presumably isn't changing much. It's just that because of ObamaCare, the health-insurance dollar doesn't go as far as it used to. The necessity for additional dollars ends up reducing employees' discretionary income.

[David Freddoso](#) of the Washington Examiner beat us to the Buckley reference, tweeting the Times story yesterday with the comment: "The first 2,000 people listed in the Boston telephone directory get their revenge."

That's one way of looking at it. Another is that, assuming no alphabetical skew, more than 1,600 of those 2,000 Bostonians would have voted for Barack Obama's re-election, and therefore for the continuation of policies designed by Harvard dons such as David Cutler "a health economist at the university who was an adviser to President Obama's 2008 campaign."

So the vast majority of the first 2,000 people listed in the Boston phone book prefer to be governed by the Harvard faculty. As per Mencken, they deserve to get it good and hard. But there are no common people among the faculty of Harvard University, so perhaps they're right in asserting they don't deserve the fate that's befallen them.

Still, that's no reason the rest of us should feel guilty about enjoying the spectacle.





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