



FRIENDS OF THE MIDDLE NEWSLETTER #226 — SEPT. 14, 2012

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The True Story of a Political Blunder

(posted by Steven W. Baker / SteveB, Sept. 14, 2012)

I don't know how the truth about Mitt R0mney could be stated any more clearly or accurately than it is in this article. How the Presidency was lost and R0mney was eventually forced by a reelected President to pay his back taxes:

"Mitt Romney Kneejerks into Another Colossal Blunder" by Bob Cesca, Huffington Post

Sept. 13, 2012, (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-cesca/mitt-romney-libya-attack_b_1881685.html?utm_hp_ref=politics)



This week, *Vanity Fair* published a beautifully written article about the president by Michael Lewis, who happened to use the American involvement with the NATO military action in Libya as a through-line. It's possibly the best insider piece on the president since a 2008 *Newsweek* series that pulled back the curtain on the president's successful 2008 campaign. (http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/2012/10/michael-lewis-profile-barack-obama?mbid=social_retweet&fb_source=message)

In addition to covering the often harrowing, emotionally tumultuous and purely weird aspects of life in the White House, as well as the president's insider tips on what's required to be the leader of the free world (for example, Obama recommended daily exercise or the job will "break you down"), the article covered a meeting of the "principals" in the Situation Room as the administration was readying a plan to keep Qaddafi from committing wholesale genocide in Benghazi. There were two options for the president: 1) participate with Europe in a completely ineffectual no-fly zone (Qaddafi was only using ground forces in his march to Benghazi), or 2) do nothing. The president determined, with obvious reason, that both options were unacceptable in spite of recommendations from both Vice President Biden and Secretary Clinton. History shows that a combination no-fly zone and air-strike operation was successfully engaged, culminating with the death of Qaddafi, a rapid end to the mission and free elections.

Regardless of the specifics, it's clear that the president approaches foreign policy decisions with deadly seriousness and doesn't kneejerk into tight spots. Furthermore, the president told Lewis that he absolutely dislikes the notion of "feigned outrage." The president, Lewis reported, values disciplined authenticity over bluster -- another trait that's helpful when dealing with sensitive overseas events.

As I read the article on Monday, I had no idea what was about to occur both in Libya and in the context of the campaign for president.

We're all aware of what happened and, in general, the sequence of events.

To review, it all began with a statement issued by the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, which attempted to preemptively mitigate the impact of an anti-Islamic no-budget American "movie" (it hardly qualifies as a movie) that was due to be released. The statement was critical of religious intolerance while defending the "universal right" to free speech. Nevertheless, unarmed protesters gathered outside the embassy and eventually climbed over the wall of the compound where they desecrated an American flag.

Meanwhile, a second attack, this time with rockets, was reported at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya -- possibly by al-Qaeda, though there's no official confirmation as of this writing -- and Foreign Service Officer Sean Smith was killed.

Next, the Romney campaign issued a statement indicting the embassy and the president for "apologizing" for American values and "sympathizing" with the protesters in Cairo and the violent militants in Benghazi -- even though the embassy statement was issued before both events. However, the statement was embargoed by Romney until midnight when the observance of a 9/11 political truce was due to end. But minutes later, at around 10:30 eastern, the Romney campaign lifted the embargo on its statement. It was still the 11th but Romney just had to stick his bulbous head into the political sh*t.

At that point, the Obama administration and Secretary Clinton issued a statement unequivocally condemning the attack in Libya:

I condemn in the strongest terms the attack on our mission in Benghazi today. As we work to secure our personnel and facilities, we have confirmed that one of our State Department officers was killed. We are heartbroken by this terrible loss. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and those who have suffered in this attack.

Then, at midnight, an overzealous Reince Priebus jumped onto Twitter and wrote, "Obama sympathizes with attackers in Egypt. Sad and pathetic." Question: how does one "sympathize" with attackers before there are any attackers, especially when, 90 minutes earlier, the administration condemned the attack? The Romney campaign and the Republican Party chairman were constructing a huge lie. Again.

Several hours later, two more embassy officials and Ambassador Chris Stevens were killed.

At 10:30 eastern Wednesday morning, 12 hours after the Romney campaign's initial statement went public, Romney held a press conference in which he continued to politicize the attacks while trying really damn hard to appear

presidential. Throughout the event, Romney repeated his assertions from 12 hours earlier that the president "sympathized" with the killers of Ambassador Stevens as well as the protesters in Cairo and "apologized" for American values.

Once again, Romney lied.

He stepped away from the podium with a self-satisfied grin on his face.

There wasn't a single moment when Romney behaved like a competent national leader. Instead of waiting until all of the facts had been revealed -- hell, instead of correctly acknowledging the facts and timelines that were absolutely known at the time -- Romney popped off and turned a tragic event into the yet another example of his predilection for inaccurate, awkward, pathetic, neophyte partisan hackery. Much like John McCain's colossal bungling of the financial crisis in 2008, Romney failed to rise to the occasion in the context of a real-life crisis. He reminded the nation of exactly why he's 10 points behind the president on national security and foreign policy -- typically a no-brainer win for militant Republicans. On one hand there's President Obama who's repeatedly displayed whip smarts and cool tenacity in every overseas endeavor in which he's engaged, and on the other hand there's a Republican candidate who not only lied about the timeline of events to score political points but also opened his yap before he knew the shot.

What ensued throughout yesterday morning was a mad dash among foreign policy experts, pundits and writers on both sides to see who could be the first to use the word "dilettante" to describe the increasingly embattled Republican nominee for president.

Interesting, isn't it, how Romney's spastic behavior and unhinged "sympathize" meme came on the heels of being goaded by Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham and others to get tough and to be more hard-lined conservative. As predicted, Romney did just that. For the rest of the day, AM talk radio joined in with the "sympathize" and "apologize" meme. And, also as predicted, I suspect voters will be utterly disgusted by all of this while coupling it with other examples of Romney's ineptitude and ungainly lack of political restraint.

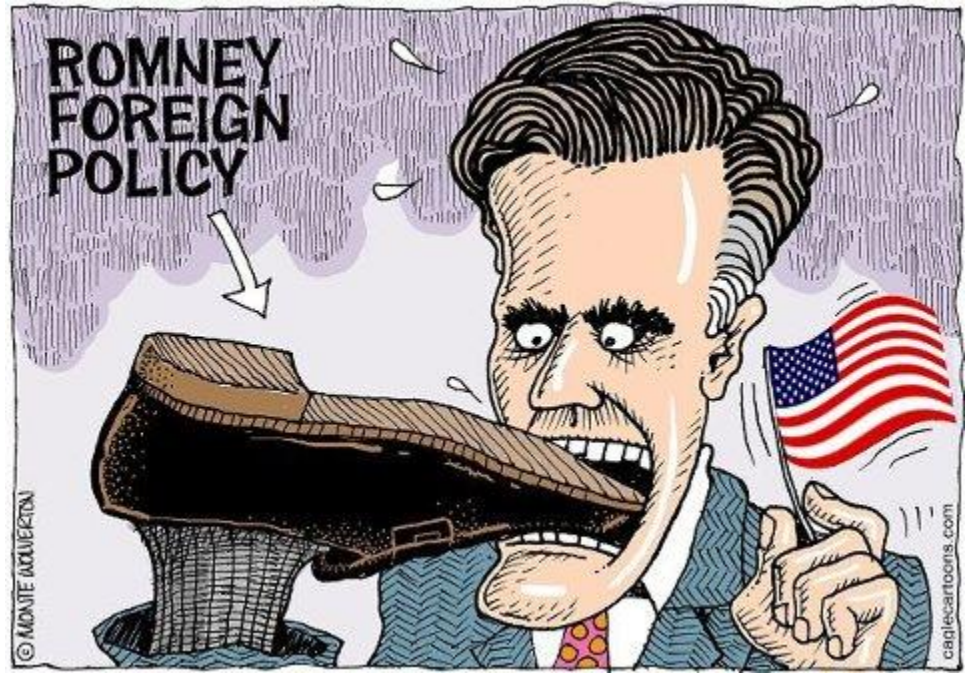
One of Romney's many miscalculations -- and a mistake that many hawkish Republicans make is to confuse obnoxious loudness with foreign policy expertise.

The opposite of a foreign policy neophyte isn't a scolding jerkass who pops off with saber-rattling bromides and political agitprop. Romney could have been a statesman about the events in North Africa and appeared dignified -- perhaps qualified -- in the process, but instead he decided to be a braying crackpot. Anyone with a lapel pin and a pulse can do that. Leaning on the warhawk slogan switch doesn't amount to anything resembling international leadership gravitas.

Put another way, Rush Limbaugh thought Romney looked "presidential" yesterday.

I rest my case.

Let there be no doubt: if Mitt Romney somehow wins this thing, the slightest provocation from Iran will trigger Romney's herky-jerky response cortex and we'll be at war in the Middle East again without a rational plan or an exit strategy. The AM radio talkers will be effectively puppeteering the Romney White House, just as they did with Romney during this week's tragic events.



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20120913-01	07:56	SteveB	From the Right: "The Problem with Mitt"
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About half of this is incredibly true. If I were a Republican, I'd be worried! And Joe never even makes it to the disastrous foreign policy arena. What a loser Mitt is!

"The Problem with Mitt" by Joe Scarborough, Politico

Sept. 12, 2012, (<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=BA47F39D-AC3B-4BA5-9751-10D764AD5C6B>)

Voters who like moderates can't trust him. Conservatives who are desperate for victory don't believe him. And the election Republicans should be winning seems to be slipping further from their grasp.

On Saturday night, I sent out a few tweets predicting Mitt Romney's defeat if he continued his directionless campaign through November. The Huffington Post turned those tweets into an article complete with a screaming headline about my "dark warning" to Republicans.

On Sunday the *Wall Street Journal* raised similar concerns after Gov. Romney went on "Meet the Press" to embrace parts of Obamacare.

By Monday, Romney reversed his Sunday position while conservative host Laura Ingraham slammed his campaign for its fecklessness. Ingraham argued that if Republicans couldn't win this year, they should shut the party down.

She's right.

Barack Obama has sunk America \$5 trillion deeper into debt, has enacted the largest stimulus plan ever, pushed through the biggest health care boondoggle in U.S. history and posted trillion-dollar deficits every year of his presidency.

And yet unemployment is still over 8 percent.

Two-thirds of Americans still think their country is headed in the wrong direction.

And Mitt Romney is still losing.

Really???

How can it be that this man who turned around countless businesses, saved the 2002 Olympics and ran Democratic Massachusetts like a pro be the head of such a disastrous campaign?

Who was responsible for burying his moving convention video behind the bumbling bluster of Clint Eastwood?

Who told Mr. Romney to issue a political broadside against the commander in chief the day after a U.S. ambassador was murdered?

And who decided that Romney would use his general election campaign to stand for absolutely nothing? The Wall Street Journal described this ideological listlessness as a "pre-existing decision." The question conservatives should be asking is whether that strategy was hatched by a misguided consultant or the candidate himself.

Whoever is responsible needs to know that replacing real conservative ideas with a flood of negative 30-second ads is a pathway to defeat.

Mitt Romney is in trouble. Not because of a boring convention or a bloodless speech or a grossly inappropriate press conference, but rather because the man refuses to stick his neck out and take a stand on the critical issues of our time.

Here are just a few:

THE NATIONAL DEBT: The United States of America is racing towards an eventual default. And yet Mitt Romney refuses to lay out a plan to balance the budget before 2040. He doesn't specify cuts, he doesn't propose eliminating agencies and he doesn't explain how his tax cuts will be offset. When it comes to balancing the budget, Mr. Romney has no plan.

MEDICARE: It's going bankrupt. But all we get from the Romney campaign is an embarrassing 30-second ad that borrows more from Bill Clinton's shameful "Mediscare" strategy than from Ronald Reagan's Morning in America campaign. Medicare benefits have to be cut over the next generation. Anyone who says otherwise is lying.

DEFENSE SPENDING: The U.S. military-industrial complex is bloated beyond belief, and yet all Mitt Romney can do is promise bigger budgets and longer wars. Today the United States spends more on its military than all other countries combined. This does not make America safer. This puts us deeper in debt and poses a far greater threat to America's long-term health than Russia and China combined.

Romney's penchant for one-upmanship on seemingly every foreign policy issue that arises would stretch our military thin and limit our ability to neutralize real threats coming from countries like Iran.

For hand-ringing Republicans who believe it is the duty of every registered member of their party to blindly follow this directionless campaign off the cliff, I would remind you of the warnings I began giving my fellow Republicans during the Bush era. My predictions beginning in 2003 that Big Government Republicanism would eventually cripple the economy and crush the conservative movement enraged party hacks and set off Washington sycophants. Some dimwits on right-wing talk radio actually challenged my conservative bona fides because I dared to challenge George W. Bush's big spending ways.

I remain convinced that if more conservatives had spoken up earlier during the Age of Bush, the routs Republicans endured in 2006 and 2008 could have been avoided. Nancy Pelosi would have never been speaker and Barack Obama would be working on his fourth autobiography instead of his second term. But Republicans chose instead to shut their mouths, circle the wagons and compromise their values.

The consequences were disastrous. And the lesson is clear: If we want to win the battle of ideas in the long term, we should be willing to face the fact that Mitt Romney is likely to lose — and should, given that he's neither a true conservative nor a courageous moderate. He's just an ambitious man. Nothing wrong with that, except when you want to be president. Great leaders combine ambition and ideas and conviction.

Margaret Thatcher was tough and unapologetic about what she believed. Ronald Reagan was tough and unapologetic about what he believed. They won their campaigns, changed their party and transformed their countries because they were conservatives who dared to tell voters they planned to radically transform their governments. They got elected and did just that.

Craven calculation, on the other hand, does not pay off for conservatives. Romney needed to decide long ago who he was: the last of the Rockefeller Republicans (and thus somebody who probably wouldn't have gotten through Iowa) or a genuine movement conservative with detailed ideas about how to right the country.

Instead, we have a nominee who represents the worst of both worlds. Any swing voter attracted by moderate Republicanism can't vote for a man who ran away from his core convictions. And conservative voters don't believe Romney has any core convictions. This has all the makings of a Greek tragedy, all playing out on C-SPAN.

Part of the tragedy for Republicans is that the opportunity is still great.

Barack Obama's acceptance speech in Charlotte exposed him as an intellectually exhausted politician. The man who brought Hope and Change to the Democratic National Convention four years ago exposed himself in Charlotte as a guy who has no new ideas and no clue where he wants to take the country over the next four years. Obama is now reduced to mindlessly repeating the same tired lines he trotted out on the campaign trail in 2008. He had somehow morphed from the political equivalent of a young Elvis rocking Mile High Stadium four years ago to becoming the fat, sweaty singer who haunted Vegas showrooms in the months before his most inglorious expiration in the summer of 1977.

But that aging rock star will win this campaign going away if Romney keeps playing it safe. That is a terrible waste for Republicans, an ominous sign for a country in desperate need of new leadership, and more than enough reason for me to stop bothering to tweet on Saturday nights.

20120913-02	08:17	Charis	Re: "The Problem with Mitt" (reply to SteveB, above)
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Maybe Romney can regain America's sympathy by pulling an Obama and blaming it all on what he's about to "inherit".

20120913-04	08:58	Pam	Re: "The Problem with Mitt" (reply to SteveB, above)
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This is very interesting. I saw John Huntsman on the Daily Show the other night, and he's a Republican I can like. Smart, funny, well-versed in foreign affairs, straight-talking. It's not the Republican party I hate; it's the people in

it. I'll always be a Democrat, because I'm on the side of the worker, not the CEO, but reasonable Republicans deserve a listen. Too bad there aren't any around.

20120913-03

08:41

SteveB

The Truth Is Precious & "Mitt Romney's Accusation Of Obama 'Sympathy' With Benghazi Attackers Makes No Sense"

If he weren't such an unlikable guy, you'd have to feel sorry for Mitt Romney.

Despite all of his struggles, he entered the Conventions in a virtual tie with the President. All he had to do was to tell the American people the truth about some plan that would solve our problems. The polls seem to show that just about any plan would do.

Instead, both Republican candidates dug deep into the dung pile of lies put out by Limbaugh, Beck, Ingraham, and all the other right-wing pundits determined to get rich by selling out America. The a-holes who write all the radical right-wing hate emails we are all bombarded with. Many you have read here in the *FotM Newsletter*. We've debunked about all of them. Lies! Usually, obvious, lazy, hateful, racist lies!

The problem with lies. They will hang you.

Romney believed some of the stupidest ones — about how President Obama had gone around the world on an "apology tour". The one about how the President didn't believe in "American exceptionalism" and sided with the Muslims over Christians. Funny thing, that tour impressed the world a lot more than Romney's recent trip, which they are still laughing at all over Europe, at least! The rest is BS undeserving of comment.

So Romney took this one lie and then spun out of control with more lies about the tragic events in the Middle East.

As everyone points out, on the scale of presidential candidate gaffes, this is right up there with McCain suspending his campaign to solve an economic crisis he had just called nonexistent.

Lies can hang you.

What a tragedy for Romney and Ryan and their families and, most of all, for the GOP. They threw it all away. The White House. The Oval Office. Air Force One. The Power. The prestige.

Too bad the man has not one idea in his head, apparently, only lies and more lies. He didn't think being President took any more preparation or morals than being a business tycoon.

I'd feel sorry for him, but I hate liars. Especially liars who seek to be my President.

Below is the best article I've found on the way the events in Cairo and Libya unfolded. May we all learn a lesson, Romney included!

"Mitt Romney's Accusation Of Obama 'Sympathy' With Benghazi Attackers Makes No Sense" by Jason Linkins, Huffington Post

Sept. 12, 2012, (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/12/mitt-romney-sympathy-libya_n_1877789.html?utm_hp_ref=politics)

In 2006, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published a series of satiric editorial cartoons that lampooned the prophet Muhammed, touching off demonstrations across the Islamic world.

The response from the Bush administration was captured for posterity by *The New York Times*:

The State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, reading the government's statement on the controversy, said, "Anti-Muslim images are as unacceptable as anti-Semitic images," which are routinely published in the Arab press, "as anti-Christian images, or any other religious belief."

Still, the United States defended the right of the Danish and French newspapers to publish the cartoons. "We vigorously defend the right of individuals to express points of view," Mr. McCormack added.

For the Bush administration, talking about the uproar represented a delicate balancing act. A central tenet of the administration's foreign policy is the promotion of democracy and human rights, including free speech, in countries where they are lacking. But a core mission of its public diplomacy is to emphasize respect for Islam in the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yesterday, outrage over a similar satiric depiction of Mohammed -- in this case, a video produced by some previously unheralded amateur filmmaker -- brought a protest to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt. The embassy, with knowledge that the protest was impending, opted to send most of its staff home, leaving behind a skeleton crew of officials who, prior to the demonstration, put out the following statement:

The Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims -- as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions. Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others.

I suppose that if you want to parse the differences between the two statements, it's arguable that what the embassy statement lacked was the "vigorous" defense of free expression offered by McCormack. I'd attribute that difference in perspective to McCormack having the luxury to speak from a safe perch at the State Department, as opposed to a nearly empty embassy in a foreign country facing an impending demonstration. Still, it seems clear that what the embassy officials were attempting, however ham-handedly, was to get the same "balancing act" right -- to assert the right to be offended while calling for calm. (As Jeffrey Goldberg points out, whatever the embassy's response may have been, it's both "ridiculous to blame Obama for them" and inane not to acknowledge that the Obama administration has "spent the past three years killing Islamist terrorists.")

But the outrage over the amateur filmmaker's video spread to Libya. There, according to reports, the protests were exploited as a diversionary tactic to facilitate an already-planned attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. As we know this morning, those attacks claimed the lives of U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens and three members of his staff.

Enter Mitt Romney, who saw an opportunity of his own to pitch political hay over this press release. The Romney campaign crafted a complicated response, which was initially embargoed until September 11th -- declared a sort of 'no cheap shot' zone -- had passed. The embargo did not hold, and late last night Romney's statement trickled out:

I'm outraged by the attacks on American diplomatic missions in Libya and Egypt and by the death of an American consulate worker in Benghazi. It's disgraceful that the Obama Administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.

Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus backed Romney up in a tweet that read:

Obama sympathizes with attackers in Egypt. Sad and pathetic.

Where does Romney get "sympathize with those who waged the attacks" from? It's the press release from the U.S. embassy in Egypt -- and that press release alone -- that forms the basis of the Romney's assertion that the Obama administration sympathizes with violent fanatics. That's a pretty tricky hang, considering the fact that the Obama administration's official stance on that press release is this: "The statement by Embassy Cairo was not cleared by Washington and does not reflect the views of the United States government." That the White House had disavowed the embassy's statement was publicly known before Romney and Priebus got into this silly political game.

Of course, what wasn't publicly known was that the overnight attacks had claimed the lives of Stevens and his colleagues -- a fact that's clear in Romney's reference to "the death of an American consulate worker in Benghazi." One thing that is explicitly known: No American official has "sympathized" with any "attacker" of any kind. That should be manifestly obvious to everybody: The embassy's press release that forms the basis of the Romney/Priebus criticism preceded any "attacks." (Let's reiterate: The press release by the embassy in Cairo preceded the Egyptian demonstrations as well.)

These basic truths now have the Romney campaign in a bit of a bind, since the press that's been reporting on the story -- and knows the order in which events transpired -- are hammering him for his response. Peter Hamby reports that the Romney camp is already trying to get his Republican allies to circle the wagons, disseminating talking points to back up his weird response. The problem is that outside Romney's circle, the response from Republicans has not been kind. Even those who seem to agree that the Egypt embassy's statement constituted de facto "sympathy" with terrorists believe that Romney's timing was inept.

Speaking on Fox today, Peggy Noonan said, "The U.S. Embassy in Egypt's statement ... after the crowds got out of control there, seemed to me to sound weak and frightened. But it really must have been a frightening moment for a lot of people. I really don't know what the higher meaning there is."

"I don't feel that Mr. Romney has been doing himself any favors in the past few hours, perhaps since last night," she said, adding, "Cool words, or no words, is the way to go" when "hot things happen."

At any rate, I'm not entirely sure what lesson Romney and Priebus have extracted from these sad developments, but for the moment, it seems to be that **a Romney White House would insist on vetting any and all press releases from any and all of the United States' foreign embassies. And Romney would insist on a high level of pre-cognition on top of that.**

[20120913-05](#) 09:45 Charis Re: The Truth Is Precious (reply to SteveB, above)

I don't like Romney. But one of the reasons I can't swallow Obama either is that I just can't stand it when our candidates whine and complain about how they "inherited" so many problems. Politicians (from all sides, I'm not registered to either party) are beginning to piss me off with their unjustified use of the word "inheritance". I'm sorry but being the president of a country is not an "inheritance". Finding out your great aunt Martha willed you her dilapidated estate which you were not even expecting, that is an inheritance. You may not like it, but it was a gift. You can even choose not to accept it. CHOOSING to run for president based on promises that you can fix the country is not a gift. If you CHOOSE to run for president, and you know IN ADVANCE OF THAT CHOICE that the country is in trouble, and that it will be hard to keep your campaign promises to "fix" things... then I'm sorry but you don't get to come crying to me 4 years later acting like a victim and saying "oh, but I inherited so many problems!" You knew the status of the country BEFORE you CHOSE to tell me that you'd be the best president for the job. So suck it up!

[20120913-07](#) 11:22 SteveB Re: The Truth Is Precious (reply to Charis, above)

Good to hear from you. Hope all is going well. We're hoping on open Snicker-Doodle in a couple of weeks at C. la Riva #124, and will be having hours of 9-12 & 3-7 until then. Probably 8-8 after opening. We like American/Fridolin-style hours if we can survive them (with help, of course).

I haven't heard the President give many excuses, though his acceptance speech contained one. It was just the truth.

I know for a fact that Republicans have worked night and day since 2008 to thwart job creation and an economic recovery in any way possible. Just hoping and planning to blame everything on the President. But, let me ask you this, where was Geo. Bush or any of his people during the Republican

Convention. It says worlds, doesn't it? And I, for one, haven't forgotten Bush, no matter how much they try to keep him hidden away.

To me, the Republicans are racists and traitors to America. In our time of need, they betrayed us for money and power. And I think their party may be on its last legs should they lose this election, now almost assured.

So, yes, Mr. Obama did inherent a mess that, given the battle Republicans are waging, could take longer than four years to transcend.

No big deal to me. None of that should fool anybody. But I will not have a lying stupid person in the White House. This is what Mitt R0mney has proven himself to be.

IMHO.

20120913-08 11:34 SteveB "Romney Foreign Policy Attack Was Disgraceful"

"Romney Foreign Policy Attack Was Disgraceful" by John Avlon, CNN

Sept. 13, 2012, (http://us.cnn.com/2012/09/13/opinion/avlon-romney-libya-attack/index.html?hpt=po_c1)

(Mitt Romney used the tragedy of the killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya to score political points, says John Avlon.)

"Partisanship ought to end at the water's edge" is a longstanding adage of American politics.

But in the hours after the death of the first U.S. ambassador killed in decades, Mitt Romney -- panicked as his poll numbers have slipped -- punched hard against the president, unleashing an unwise, inaccurate and unpresidential attack on the Obama administration.

The fog of war applies to the confusion about the timeline of ugly incidents in the Middle East on the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But when the U.S. Embassy in Cairo released a statement condemning the obscure and intentionally inflammatory film that had already given rise to riots, the Romney campaign saw an opportunity to amplify its "Obama-Apologizes-For-America" narrative.

Despite the fact that U.S. missions in Egypt and Libya came under attack after that embassy statement, with crowds besieging the Cairo embassy and the consulate in Benghazi in the late hours of September 11, the campaign released a statement from Romney saying, "It's disgraceful that the Obama Administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks."

This barely qualifies as dog-whistle politics. At a moment when sovereign U.S. soil was under attack by Islamist radicals, the Romney campaign tried to tie the president to those extremists attacking us, saying that he had "sympathy" with their cause.

And then, in the clear light of morning, Mitt Romney doubled down on the claim, repeating it -- perhaps for fear of appearing weak -- and his campaign released talking points to hammer home the point. He picked precisely the wrong time, and over the wrong issue, to go "bold."

This is not just politics as usual but something far lower. By point of comparison, when Ronald Reagan was confronted with the downed-helicopter rescue mission ordered by President Jimmy Carter to save the American hostages in the U.S. Embassy in Iran, he did not see it as opportunity to score political points. Instead, Reagan said, "This is the time for us as a nation and a people to stand united." Likewise, George H.W. Bush, then also running for president, said "I unequivocally support the president of the United States -- no ifs, ands or buts -- and it certainly is not a time to try to go one-up politically. He made a difficult, courageous decision." (Hat-tip to *The Atlantic* for unearthing these statements.)

No wonder a wide array of Republican foreign policy experts rose to condemn Romney's comments, including the longtime speechwriter and senior aide to Sen. John McCain, Mark Salter, who wrote: "to condemn (Obama) for policies they claim helped precipitate the attacks is as tortured in its reasoning as it is unseemly in its timing."

I called one of the wise men of American foreign policy, Charles Hill, a longtime first deputy to Reagan Secretary of State George Schultz and now a professor at Yale and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, as well as the author of "Grand Strategies" and "Trial of a Thousand Years: World Order and Islamism."

"In my opinion, Obama is rightly criticized for a foreign policy approach that has not been firm enough. But in this case, the Romney statement was overreaction and not proper," Hill said. "Romney should be standing as an American with Americans right now and not trying to narrowly pursue political profit. I would not have advised him to release that statement."

On the flip side were conservative populist luminaries like Sarah Palin, who took to Facebook, her only dependable perch these days, to write this: "We already know that President Obama likes to 'speak softly' to our enemies. If he doesn't have a 'big stick' to carry, maybe it's time for him to grow one." Once again, Palin proved that she doesn't have the temperament or the intellect to be within a thousand feet of the Oval Office.

It is also noteworthy that the Romney campaign's instinct is to attack the president on foreign policy but then refuse to articulate its own policy positions as a useful point of contrast. This "attack and distract" approach to politics is beneath the office; when you criticize there is an obligation to propose new solutions to the problem.

When Romney embarked on his European tour, he frequently cited the tradition of not criticizing a president while traveling overseas as justification for not answering questions about his own foreign policy beliefs. This seemed to many, including me, at the time to be a high-minded excuse to avoid answering specific questions. Now there is no doubt. It was not decency or a desire to get all the facts before condemning the president that restrained his campaign's rhetoric.

Many questions still remain. The online "film" that apparently provoked the attack seems thrown together and badly over-dubbed to create maximum insult to Islam. It has been promoted by some of the most discredited conspiracy entrepreneurs on our side of the Atlantic, including the "Reverend" Terry Jones, who advocated Quran-burning in the past. The American principle of defending free speech cannot be allowed to be compromised by fanatics anywhere for any reason.

There is, as the president said Wednesday in the Rose Garden, "no excuse" for the actions of this murderous mob in Libya or for the invasion of the embassy in Egypt. Reports are emerging that the Benghazi siege was a premeditated attack by our enemies. Hill describes unsettling parallels: "With the radical Muslims, there's a kind of connection between the crazy guys in Florida who make this film and the crazy guys in Libya who plan these attacks deliberately and use the films as an excuse, a provocation," he says. "There's a kind of demonic conspiracy between these two types of fringe groups, and it makes life less secure for the rest of us."

Romney is a good man, but his lack of core political beliefs combined with his otherwise admirable competitiveness has led him to make claims about opponents that are often overheated and unrelated to reality. The dishonest drumbeat that Obama travels around the world compulsively apologizing for America is a core Romney campaign tactic. This time, he went definitively too far -- trying to score petty political points with incomplete information at a time when our nation's embassies were being attacked overseas on the anniversary of September 11.

It was disgraceful.

[Comment from DrDougFCCollapse:](#)

To fully appreciate how disgraceful Romney's statements were, I think it is important for people to put themselves in the embassy workers' shoes. Americans embassy workers, who risk their lives every day to serve our interests abroad, were surrounded by rioters and in fear for their lives; they put out a statement trying to calm tensions. Romney's response was to politicize the statement, use it as a tool to attack Obama (while mangling the details and the timeline), and in the process further inflamed tensions.

During times of crisis, Americans rally around each other and ask questions later. This is something that the Republicans understood during Carter's hostage rescue debacle, and something that the Democrats understood on 9/11. What does it say about Romney that he is more interested in scoring political points than in standing together as Americans during a time of crisis?

Comment from PhillyEricCollapse:

To the handful of fools trying to blame this attack on Obama's foreign policy "failures," I can only assume that you likewise believe that the 12 attacks on embassies/consulates during the Bush administration prove his foreign policy failures, the four attacks on embassies during the Clinton years prove his failures, the 7 embassy attacks during the Reagan years prove his failures, etc.

The reality is that sometimes our enemies attack us. It is enlightening to compare the current situation to the publication of the Mohammed cartoons. In both cases, there were major riots. Like the Obama administration, the Bush administration condemned the cartoons while also standing up for freedom of speech and condemning violence (Bush's comments were nearly identical to those coming from the Obama administration). Anyone from either side that uses the embassy attacks or Mohammed riots to condemn either Bush or Obama without condemning the other is clearly just blinded by partisanship.

20120913-15	15:03	SteveB	Fw: MoveOn Action: Write a Letter to the Editor about Romney's Character!
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Our hearts go out to the families of U.S. Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens and the other Americans who lost their lives during Tuesday night's attack on the U.S. Consulate in Libya. Demonstrations outside several U.S. embassies continue, and American officials may still be in danger.

At such a grave moment, Mitt Romney could have chosen words to help console and unite a nation in grief. Instead, he launched a false and craven attack on our president.

Romney accused President Obama of "sympathizing" with the murderers and apologizing for American values, based on a statement the president never made.¹

Even Republicans were shocked by Romney's response. "Just calling it a 'disgrace' doesn't really cut it," says a former John McCain aide.² "It wasn't presidential," according to a former Bush State Department official.³

When faced with a national emergency, Romney rushed to judgment, acted rashly, lied to the American people, and put politics ahead of the national interest.

That's something voters need to consider when they decide who has the temperament to be Commander in Chief. You have the power to make that happen by getting in the most highly read section of the newspaper: the letters to the editor.

Write a letter to the editor about Romney's character and judgement:

http://pol.moveon.org/lte/index.html?lte_campaign_id.

Here's what happened. In response to a clearly offensive amateur film defaming Islam, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo condemned efforts "to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims."⁴

In a misguided attempt to exploit the Libyan tragedy, Romney falsely attributed this statement to the White House, falsely claimed it was an apology, and falsely identified it as a response to the attacks, even though it was made before the attacks.⁵

In fact, while President Obama rightly rejected the denigration of religious beliefs, he strongly condemned the attacks, saying, "we must all unequivocally oppose the kind of senseless violence that took the lives of these public servants."⁶

Americans are probably asking themselves today whether Romney failed a critical test of leadership. One senior Republican even called this Romney's "Lehman moment," in reference to Senator McCain's failure to act as a steady leader in response to the Lehman Brother's crisis in 2008.⁷

But what matters even more is what you think. Your voice can be the most powerful in shaping the views of your friends and neighbors. So share your thoughts about what Romney's actions say about his fitness to lead.

Influence views in your community by writing a letter to the editor.

Thanks for all you do. –Justin, Laura, Stefanie, Wes, and the rest of the team

Sources:

¹"Obama Condemns Attack That Kills Ambassador to Libya," *The New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://www.moveon.org/r?r=280653&id=51585-20195165-fcBaDax&t=4>.

²"Foreign Policy Hands Voice Disbelief At Romney Cairo Statement," BuzzFeed, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://www.moveon.org/r?r=280582&id=51585-20195165-fcBaDax&t=5>.

³Ibid.

⁴"An embassy statement, a tweet, and a major misunderstanding," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 13, 2012.

"Mitt Romney will never be president," Salon.com, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://www.moveon.org/r?r=280608&id=51585-20195165-fcBaDax&t=7>.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Obama Addresses Libya Attacks, Death of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens," The Huffington Post, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://www.moveon.org/r?r=280661&id=51585-20195165-fcBaDax&t=8>.

⁷"Foreign Policy Hands Voice Disbelief At Romney Cairo Statement," BuzzFeed, Sept. 12, 2012, <http://www.moveon.org/r?r=280582&id=51585-20195165-fcBaDax&t=9>.

20120913-17	20:10	SteveB	"Romney Hasn't Earned Our Trust"
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"Romney Hasn't Earned Our Trust" by LZ Granderson, CNN

Sept. 12, 2012, (http://us.cnn.com/2012/09/12/opinion/granderson-romney-trust/index.html?hpt=po_r1)

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been asking random people who identify as Republicans if they trust Mitt Romney, and each of them gave me an answer like this -- "I trust him more than I trust Obama." It's just a long winded way of saying "no."

They said they did want to see his taxes.

They said they have reservations about a major tax plan lacking specifics.

Some said they saw the video of him describing himself as a pro-abortion rights moderate; others knew that in the hardcover version of his book "No Apology," he expressed pride in Romneycare and believed that "we can accomplish the same thing for everyone in the country." They know he flip flops.

Misspeaks. (<http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2012/02/mitt-romney-misspoke-very-poor-1#.UE-jdO2nBWg>)

Lies. (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/aug/07/mitt-romney/mitt-romney-says-barack-obamas-plan-abandons-tenet/>)

And yet, their dislike of President Barack Obama is so strong that they're willing to overlook that whole character thing and swallow the bitter pill that is Romney.

How can they do that, you say?

Well for starters, Obama isn't exactly a rock of Gibraltar himself.

Politifact's "Obameter" has been keeping track of the more than 500 promises the president made during the 2008 campaign and found thus far he's kept 37% of them. He's broken 16%, compromised on 14% and is still working on another 22%.

So even though Romney smells, Obama's not exactly lilacs.

He promised to address gun control. He hasn't.

He promised to close Gitmo. It's still open.

Obama was for gay marriage, then he was against it, and now he's for it again.

If you believe his evolution wasn't about politics, then you probably believe Jimmy Carter was robbed in 1980.

This is why some Republicans are willing to vote for a guy they may not trust: He's viewed as the lesser of two evils. But pointing out the evils in the other party does nothing to address the evils in their own.

Here's the thing: The question of trusting Mitt Romney has nothing to do with Barack Obama.

It's about Romney.

Voters might not like to think about that too much, but they need to look beyond campaign sleight of hand to give it some serious thought because the future of the middle class depends on it.

This week, both Romney and VP hopeful Paul Ryan have been touting a multitrillion dollar tax-cutting plan with no details, essentially asking voters to take it on faith that it'll all work out. Many conservative pundits, including George Will, say Romney's math -- where it exists -- is a bit fuzzy and all Romney can say is "trust me."

So again, I ask Republicans: Do you?

Not in comparison to Obama, but in comparison to your understanding of the word trust. Knowing what you know - and don't know.

Because if he wins, saying "I trust him more than I trust Obama" is not going to help matters in January. It's not going to protect the middle class' ability to write off the interest on their mortgages or deduct charitable giving. Romney said the plan won't touch those deductions, but he won't tell us which deductions it will touch.

Trust him with our taxes, he says.

And yet, he won't trust us to even look at his.

At the Republican National Convention, Mitt's wife, Ann, painted a picture of their early years together as if the two of them were barely getting by. And then an old *Boston Globe* interview surfaced in which she said "we were happy, studying hard. Neither one of us had a job, because Mitt had enough of an investment from stock that we could sell off a little at a time."

Realizing that struggling college students work and don't usually live off investments, she backed away from her earlier characterization, telling "Meet the Press" later that, "Mitt and I do recognize that we have not had a financial struggle in our lives."

Uhm ... you do know that she didn't just realize this, right?

You do know that her speech was designed to manipulate voters in an attempt to paint her husband as a regular Joe, a guy just like them, someone they could trust.

So ... do you?

Do you trust Mitt Romney?

Obama has only kept 37% of his promises. But Politifact's GOP Pledge-O-Meter, which they describe as having followed "dozens of promises made in 2010 by Republican leaders" and in their Pledge to America, found that the GOP has only kept 19% of its promises.

[I thought 37% sounded awfully good, myself. –SteveB]

If you can't trust a guy who has only kept 37% of his promises, how do you trust leaders that have only kept 19% of theirs?

Better yet, how do you trust a guy, who as governor of Massachusetts, signed an assault weapon ban in 2004, reiterated his support for a ban in 2007 and then shows up at an NRA convention in 2012 talking like some sort of John Wayne wannabe?

I don't think you can.

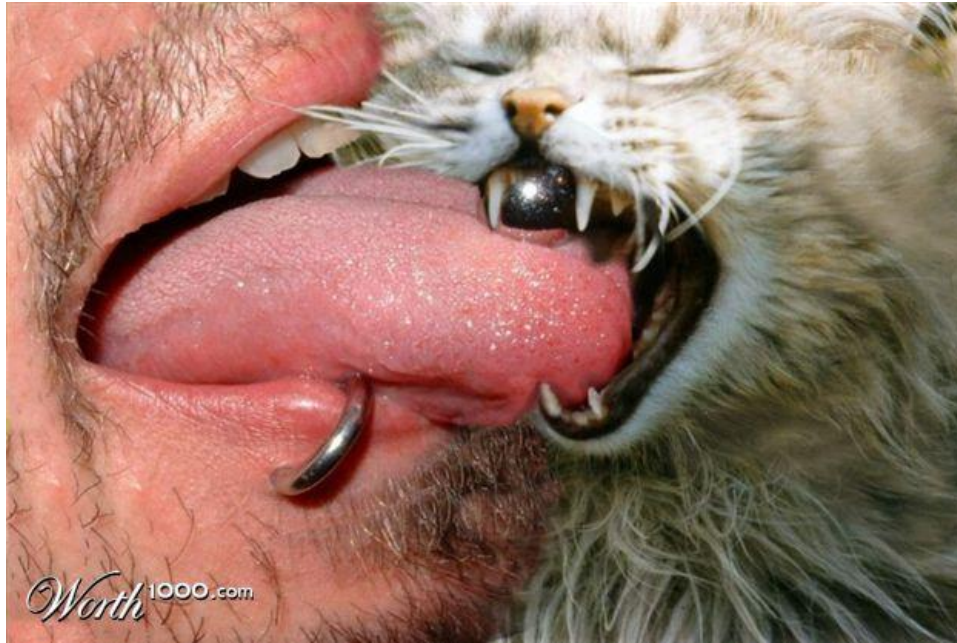
Which I guess is why many Republicans have a hard time saying they do.

20120913-06	11:05	SteveB	Cat Got Yer Tongue? (to SteveM)
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Cat suddenly got yer tongue? What about my challenge to find one truth & not deny it? Could be the chance of a lifetime! Could revolutionize yer thinking.

You aren't gonna chicken out and run away like all the other right-wingers do when confronted with the truth, are ya?

All the sissies have run away. I hope you aren't one of them, my friend. After all, it ain't life, it's just politics.



20120913-10 12:45 SteveM Re: Cat Got Yer Tongue? (reply to SteveB, above)

You certainly have a short memory which allows you to say things like "I've never attacked you" or called you names.

I'm surprised you don't recognize the tactics, as the same ones you've used on me in the past only more severe. You've heard the expression "I give as good as I get"? Or to borrow a phrase widely attributed to the Hells Angels, treat me good I'll treat you better, treat bad and in I'll treat you worse.

[Well...it's all there in the FotM Newsletters and *Political Inbox: 2007-2011*. If I mistreated you, show me, but be sure to read the 200 preceding emails from you and see if a man might be rightly pi*sed off by your obnoxious behavior over and over again. -SteveB]

In hindsight, I see that you've used my e-mails as a foil for your group. Posting what was never intended for them. Which is just like you. [It is! Isn't it? See my response, below. -SteveB]

I never intended to join your group or thought I was participating because this is between you and me MF.

Therefore I think you owe the group an apology for using my writings to get them riled up. After all I've never posted to friends of the left.

You should think more carefully before you attack me or those that I love and care about I never forget.

In closing thank God Romney stood up for this country instead of apologizing to the rag heads in the Middle East, we owe them nothing.

It was 9/11 for Gods sake. With a beloved ambassador dead, along with 4 others and anti-American turmoil in Arab nations spreading, O'bama took off for 'Vegas to collect some campaign cash and started his speech with, "It's been a tough day for us." WTF? That's not leadership!

[I can see you've read "The American Media Beclowned Themselves Yesterday" by Erick Erickson at RedState, or some derivative right-wing screed. Almost a direct quote. Talking point? -SteveB]

Obama has weakened America's economy and has an even more dismal national security record. Apologizing for America, appeasing our enemies, abandoning our allies and slashing our military.

[All lies in this last paragraph! The most obvious and easiest to disprove is the fictitious "slashing our military." What a joke. I wish it were true! These are all just Tea Party "talking points". –SteveB]

20120913-14 14:58 SteveB Re: Cat Got Yer Tongue? (reply to SteveM, above)

By the way, you misquote me. I said:

YOU HAVE A LOT OF GODDAMNED NERVE TO TALK TO ME ABOUT PERSONAL ATTACKS THE WAY YOU HAVE DONE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING HERE, CONTRIBUTED NOTHING HERE EXCEPT ATTACKS UPON MR. OBAMA AND PERSONAL ATTACKS UPON ME.

When have I called you a name? You call me "jack a*s" (above), etc., daily!

And, by the way, for your information, to call a public figure or a politician a name or to criticize them is not at all the same, legally or socially, as your constant cowardly foul-mouthing of other equal America citizens (my group and I), when all we are trying to do is discuss politics in a friendly, respectful manner in the democracy that is America.

I didn't say "I've never attacked you or called you names." But I don't remember doing that, not that, given your obstinacy, it would be completely impossible for me to have done so. I can guarantee you one thing I think you have to agree with, I've been more restrained than you.

I don't really mind the name calling, etc, but I do mind that it makes you look...well...let me just say, it makes you seem not as intelligent as I know you to be.

I don't use anybody's writings except to share them, respond, and comment. That's what I do and I've sent you the *FotM Newsletter* for a long time now, you're in it from nearly the beginning, sending your anti-Obama hate mail full of provably false assertions and innuendo. I'm sorry if you couldn't bother to read our newsletter. Any time you wish to communicate privately with me, let me know and I will honor that. Also, remember, you are anonymous here, though not all of us are. And, legally, emails are just like letters, they belong to the receiving party if they don't have a previous copyright.

As in life, if you think something you might say might hurt somebody or be offensive or reflect back on yourself negatively, maybe it's better not to express those thoughts unless you're prepared for those outcomes.

And once again, you are believing lies and have the facts wrong:

What happened in Cairo & Benghazi had nothing to do with Mr. Obama apologizing for anything. These are all stupid Romney lies, everyone know it, and I can prove it. Read something other than far-right liars!

Ya, "dismal national security record" having killed bin Laden and many others, getting us, thank God, out of Iraq, doing his best in Afghanistan, and restoring respect for America in the world (I know, I'm out there!). Your words are pure fantasy. Pure Salvador Dali. The worst thing the President has done is not shrink the military, which you should love except, for some reason, you believe the opposite of provable reality. You choose to believe the impossible lie that the President has "decimated" the military and demoralized them. Pure poppycock!

You must know by now that only you and Rush believe these Republican lies, and he's making half of them up and feeding them to you, and you're swallowing every one of them. If not, tell me which lie of the Right do you not believe? No birth certificate? Muslim? Anti-Christian? Apology tour? Obamacare? Tax breaks for billionaires? "Entitlement" cuts for everyone else? Creationism? You seem to believe every single one of them. Believe me, none of us here follow any party line as if our lives depended upon it. We seek, find, and depend upon something that seems to be missing from your end of the discussion—verifiable FACTS!

You need to apologize to the truth, my friend. Seek it and you will learn. Respect it and you will grow.

You're actually starting to worry me and I don't mean this as an insult, I just don't know any other way of saying it. You act a lot like one of my grandfathers. He was staying at our house when he was very old. He became convinced that the Russians were, or were soon to be, attacking and he had to find his gun and defend America. Naturally, the last thing we were going to let him get close to was a gun.

Just the truth...

20120913-09	12:36	SteveB	"The Great Deregulator"
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Maybe the 2012 Democratic nation Conventions changed everything, but many of us still see Bill Clinton in much the same light many Republicans view George Bush—someone who was a traitor to principles of their party.

"The Great Deregulator" by Robert Scheer, Truthdig/NationofChange

Sept. 13, 2012, (<http://www.nationofchange.org/great-deregulator-1347543380>)

Bill Clinton bears as much responsibility as any politician for the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and the wild applause for his disingenuous speech at the Democratic National Convention last week is a sure sign of the poverty of what passes for progressive politics.

Do those convention delegates, and the fawning media that were wowed by the former president's rhetorical seductions, not recall that just before he left office Clinton signed off on the game-changing legislation that ended the sensible rules imposed on Wall Street during the Great Depression? It was Clinton who cooperated with the Republicans in reversing the legacy of FDR's New Deal, opening the floodgates of unfettered avarice that almost drowned the world's economy during the reign of George W. Bush.

How convenient to ignore the Financial Services Modernization Act, which Clinton signed into law to summarily end the Glass-Steagall barrier against the commingling of investment and commercial banking. Do the Democrats not remember that Citigroup, the first too-big-to-fail bank made legal by the law Clinton signed, became the \$15 million employer of Robert Rubin, the Clinton treasury secretary who led the fight for the law that legalized the creation of Citigroup? Or that Citigroup—led by Sanford Weill, to whom Clinton gave one of the souvenir pens he used to approve that onerous legislation—went on to be a major player in the subprime mortgage swindles and had to be bailed out with more than \$50 billion of taxpayer funds?

Those scams were based on bundling suspect mortgages into collateralized debt obligations (CDOs), backed by the phony insurance of credit default swaps (CDSs), all of which were given "legal certainty," to quote Lawrence Summers, who replaced Rubin as Clinton's treasury secretary. It was Summers who encouraged Clinton to sign the Commodity Futures Modernization Act, which declared CDOs and CDSs immune to any existing regulatory law and the purview of any regulatory agency.

Timothy Geithner, a protégé of Rubin and Summers in the Clinton Treasury Department, was appointed, with Rubin's enthusiastic endorsement, to be head of the New York Fed while Bush was president. Geithner happily partnered with the Bush administration in saving AIG and funneling trillions of dollars to the banks that had caused the crisis. When Barack Obama appointed Geithner as treasury secretary, the new president committed to the Bush strategy of saving the bankers rather than those in the middle class who had much of their life savings tied up in the vanished equity in their homes.

The Democrats who boast so much about their inclusion of black and brown people have not seemed to notice that the accumulated wealth of both groups has declined by more than half since the onset of this crisis, wiping out much of the economic gains of the civil rights movement.

Sorry, I couldn't dance at the party as I did with the Democrats the last time around. Of course I prefer Obama over Republican Mitt Romney, who is backed by a rapacious crowd of hucksters who have rallied around the former

CEO of Bain Capital as one of their own. If Wall Street financial moguls are now giving more money to Romney than to Obama, it is a measure of the extent of their greed rather than Obama's effectiveness in curtailing that greed. The banks are bigger and more powerful than ever. The quite-limited victories for consumers cited in convention speeches by Massachusetts Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren and California Attorney General Kamala Harris—both truly heroic fighters for consumer rights—were accomplished over the objections of White House insiders.

Obama has followed the examples of Summers and Geithner instead of those of Warren and Harris, and that is what has made the election a tossup as voters continue to suffer in an economy that Democrats as well as Republicans wrecked.

Once again, the thing that saves the Democrats is the capricious evil that now defines the Republican Party. In another time, Romney might have been in the mold of Dwight Eisenhower, a moderate and socially sensitive leader who offered a perhaps more efficient but no less caring alternative to the big-city-based Democrats of his era. As Clinton pointed out in his address, it was Eisenhower who sent federal troops to guarantee the integration of Little Rock High School in Arkansas over the objection of many Southern Democratic politicians and who also built the federal highway system. In short, Ike was a balanced and thoroughly decent GOP leader of the sort that Romney's own father, George, aspired to be.

Not so the son, who attacks the automobile industry bailout that his auto manufacturer father would have embraced, as he would have Obama's moderate health care program, based in every significant detail on Mitt Romney's version in Massachusetts. Romney is an unmitigated liar unrestrained by any moral or logical standard, as demonstrated in his defense of the Bain Capital experience. That part Clinton got right.

[20120913-11](#)

12:50

Pam

Re: "How the American University Was Killed, in Five Easy Steps" (reply to SteveB, FotM Newsletter #225)

(This is WAY too long, so don't feel bad if you don't make it through. Once I got started, I was on a roll and just went with it.)

Debra Scott's article on the hijacking of the American university comes on the heels of a conversation I had recently with a friend who is, like me, one of the marginalized and underpaid "precariate." I taught at a southern state university for nearly thirty years and never had a contract for longer than two years at a time, usually for just a semester or at most a year at a time. I always loved September because it meant I'd get a paycheck for at least the next four months. April was more anxious, as the summer loomed. I have seen firsthand everything Scott describes in her article: skyrocketing tuition, reliance on adjunct faculty, deals made with corporations, bloated administrative salaries. It's all true and then some.

I loved the school where I taught. I still think one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me was ending up there. I did my graduate study, then stayed on to teach until I retired, and I felt incredibly fortunate. I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. A lot has changed in thirty years. The humanities have taken a big hit. The once-required, two-semester Western Civ. program was shut down and reduced to a few elective classes. This ambitious program was what I, and many of my colleagues, saw as the core of a liberal education that applied to any and every major. It included history, science, economics, literature, art, music. I even gave a lecture on 18th c. landscape gardening, showing how it recaptured the classical past and embodied the social and political values of the time. I learned more myself teaching that course than from the rest of my education combined. (Hyperbole, but not by much.) A couple of years ago the Classics dept. was threatened with closure, and 40 programs all across campus were abandoned, including the innovative "Writing Across the Curriculum" that worked with professors in all disciplines to require writing in their courses. Faculty have received no raises for four years now, but the administration has grown by leaps and bounds, and our chancellor makes upwards of half a million dollars a year, plus perks.

The friend I mentioned above has a PhD in English from the University of Chicago, one of the top programs in the country. Tired of holding her breath every semester, hoping for enough classes to qualify for benefits, she finally gave up academia altogether. Her husband is still in the English dept., one of the remaining few who actually loves literature. His specialty is Shakespeare and 17th c. lit. Most of the faculty I knew as a grad student and lecturer

have retired, and I don't know many of the new crop who have taken over, but here are some of the changes they've instituted: freshman composition instructors are explicitly forbidden to use "literature" in their classes; the emphasis is now on "learning skills" rather than on content; teaching is not even secondary to research, it isn't emphasized at all. Rather than allowing a scholar to develop into someone with something important to say (which applies especially to the humanities, if not to music, art, math and science), untenured faculty are required to "publish or perish." Pity the young professor whose book contract comes after the deadline for his tenure review. Now even graduate students are expected to publish articles, and no one gets a job without at least one book to his credit. That's if you want tenure, a reasonable salary, benefits, and the security to raise your family. Everyone else, and I include myself in this number, serves at the pleasure of the state legislature and the budget they set every July. Part-timers are thin on the ground these days, as the money just isn't there, and tenure-track faculty have to spend so much time and energy on creating a dossier that interacting with students has to take a back seat, whether they like it or not. I loved my job, and I suppose I lacked the ambition to jump into the fray and sacrifice my quality of life for the brass ring of tenure at some dusty prairie college, far from family and friends, so you may justifiably say I made my choice. I did, and I have no regrets. But I had a PhD and two Master's degrees, I worked hard, and I was a good teacher, popular with my students, and my goal was to make \$40,000 before I retired. I almost made it. The chancellor, I remind you, makes in the neighborhood of \$500,000.

Because there is no money in higher education, unless you are an administrator or a public figure, our best and brightest students most often opt to go into more lucrative fields, like managing a hedge fund or working at Goldman Sachs. Even medicine feels the pinch, and my guess is, it's not so much the money that is lacking as the enormous cost of medical school and the burdensome restrictions of our current broken health care system that are discouraging. But all this talk of money is not the real issue. Now that Scott has pointed it out, I can readily see that there has been a concerted, if possibly unconscious, effort on the part of corporate America to shape our educational system to its needs. This, after all, is what Horace Mann did in the 19th c. when he developed the American high school. Train pupils to follow rules, keep quiet and remain in place, regulate their lives with bells that tell them when to do what, and imbibe American mores and attitudes. Perfect training for a factory worker, who was likely an immigrant. The emphasis now is on "group work," cooperation with others rather than individual effort, scantron tests rather than considered essays. Buzz words abound: "outcomes and goals," "student-centered," "learning skills," "critical thinking," "values-free." No one is supposed to say a poem is beautiful anymore. An emotional response to a Keats' Ode is seen as squishy, not rigorous, not scientific. Everything must have utility in a practical sense. In a way I was fortunate, and I was aware of it, believe me. Because I was not in a tenure-track position, I could fly beneath the radar and do my own thing. Because I had the time to devote to students, I was able to lavish attention on my small classes of Honors students, who were also outside the mainstream of the university. In Honors we could innovate, challenge, mentor, and expand our minds as well as those of our students. Here's a secret: send your kid to a more-affordable state university and get her into the Honors Program. That's where the real liberal education happens. It's true that large institutions rely on huge classes, especially at the undergraduate level, often taught by adjuncts or grad students. Many bemoan the fact that senior faculty are seldom seen in a freshman or sophomore classroom. But consider the poor adjunct. He teaches because he is passionate about his subject and values his students. He has time to prepare, and if he's no good, his student evaluations will jeopardize his future employment. (One downside here is consequent grade inflation.) Why would anyone choose such a fate? Because a teacher, especially in the humanities at the college level, knows the value of a liberal education that is increasingly under threat and is willing to sacrifice in order to keep it alive.

[20120913-12](#)

13:21

Art

Re: "How the American University Was Killed, in Five Easy Steps" (reply to Pam, above)

Great article. Thanks Pam. A bit how the tide turns, when I taught Military History at UC Davis in the 60's one of the pushes was to throw ROTC off campus because it taught a skill as opposed to "pure education" . However, when the faculty groups looked at it, already lots of classes and indeed some Departments such as Vet medicine were really more focused on teaching a skill or skills, as opposed to just general education, so they left us alone. To this day I don't know what the right answer is.

[20120913-13](#) 14:08 Pam Re: "How the American University Was Killed, in Five Easy Steps" (reply to Art, above)

Balance. We need people with skills, no doubt about it. I certainly want my neurosurgeon to have lots of them. But we need people who are thoughtful, mindful, informed, and reflective if those with skills aren't to remain automatons doing the bidding of their corporate masters. I hate to say this, and perhaps I'm showing a limited understanding of Plato, but his analysis of the ideal society in "The Republic" seems pretty accurate to me. Philosopher Kings at the top, a small, educated elite who know a lot and pursue truth in a disinterested way. They set policy, based on humane values. Below them the Guardians, who carry out policy. They are semi-educated, have some philosophical understanding, but are more managers than thinkers. Below them, everyone else: the merchants, artisans, farmers, etc.--those whose necessary skills don't necessarily require depth of thought. It sounds like "Brave New World," and I've always found it pretty scary, but the truth is, we do need people with enlarged souls and minds, and the way to develop them is through education in the liberal arts. It would be ridiculous to expect every citizen to attain the same level of understanding--about anything--but what we have now privileges the few at the expense of the many, and the privileged are not our best thinkers.

[20120913-18](#) 20:25 SteveB Re: "How the American University Was Killed, in Five Easy Steps" (reply to Pam & Art, above)

You guys got me thinking...

We all know there has been a Republican war against American public education for some time now. They want vouchers. They want home schooling. They want unions killed. They want teachers to have no rights and, especially, no unions or tenure. And most of all, they don't want to pay more taxes, especially property taxes.

But I wonder if there has been something more sinister at work too. I wonder if the big money Republican fat cats have a secret agenda for American education too? After all, ignorant people are the easiest to manipulate.

Perhaps the Koch Brothers forays into political manipulation are just the latest of their abortions.

Just as with the invisible forces behind our massive illegal immigration, maybe the powerful have a plan for our schools and our children that we don't know about...

Not that I'm much of a conspiracy theorist, but this particular "theory" would sure make a lot of things make sense.

[20120913-16](#) 18:11 Pam "Why Do People Hate Teachers Unions? Because They Hate Teachers."

"Why Do People Hate Teachers Unions? Because They Hate Teachers." by Corey Robin

Sept. 12, 2012, (<http://coreyrobin.com/2012/09/12/why-people-do-hate-teachers-unions-because-they-hate-teachers/>)

Like Doug Henwood, I've spent the last few days trying to figure out why people—particularly liberals and pseudo-liberals in the chattering classes—hate teachers unions. One could of course take these people at their word—they care about the kids, they worry that strikes hurt the kids, and so on—but since we never hear a peep out of them about the fact that students have to swelter through 98-degree weather in jam-packed classes without air conditioning, I'm not so inclined.

Forgive me then if I essay an admittedly more impressionistic analysis drawn from my own experience.

Like many of these journalists, I hail from an upper middle class background. I grew up in Chappaqua, an affluent suburb of New York. My parents moved there in 1975 for the schools, which were—and I believe still are—terrific. From elementary school through senior year, I had some of the best teachers I've ever encountered.

Two of my social studies teachers—Allan Damon and Tom Corwin—had more of an impact on me than any professor I ever had in college or grad school. In their classes, I read Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, E.H. Carr's *What Is History?*, Michael Kammen's *People of Paradox*, Hobbes, Locke, Richard Hakluyt, Albert Thayer Mahan, and more. When I got to college, I found that I was considerably better prepared than my classmates, many of whom had gone to elite private schools in Manhattan and elsewhere. It's safe to say I would never have become an academic were it not for these two men.

We also had a terrific performing arts program. Phil Stewart, Chappaqua's legendary acting teacher, trained Vanessa Williams, Roxanne Hart, Dar Williams, and more. We put on obscure musicals and destabilizing plays like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Ronald Dunn, our choral teacher, had us singing Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Vivaldi's *Gloria*, and the works of Fauré. So inspiring were these teachers that many of us went onto organize our own plays, musicals, and a cappella groups, while we were still in high school.

Despite this, many kids and their parents held teachers in contempt. Teachers were not figures of respect or gratitude; they were incompetents and buffoons. Don't get me wrong: like most people, I had some terrible teachers. Incompetents and worse. But like most people I've also had some terrible friends, some terrible co-workers, some terrible neighbors, some terrible doctors, some terrible editors, and some terrible professors. Mediocrity, I'd venture, is a more or less universal feature of the human condition. But among the upper classes it's treated as the exclusive preserve of teachers.

It's odd. Even if you're the most toolish striver—i.e., many of the people I grew up with—teachers are your ticket to the Ivy League. And if you're an intellectually ambitious academic type like me, they're even more critical. Like I said, people move to Chappaqua for the schools, and if the graduation and post-graduate statistics are any indication—in my graduating class of 270, I'd guess about 50 of us went onto an Ivy League school—they're getting their money's worth. Yet many people I grew up with treated teachers as bumptious figures of ridicule—and not in your anarchist-critique-of-all-social-institutions kind of way.

It's clear where the kids got it from: the parents. Every year there'd be a fight in the town over the school budget, and every year a vocal contingent would scream that the town was wasting money (and raising needless taxes) on its schools. Especially on the teachers (I never heard anyone criticize the sports teams). People hate paying taxes for any number of reasons—though financial hardship, in this case, was hardly one of them—but there was a special pique reserved for what the taxes were mostly going to: the teachers.

In my childhood world, grown ups basically saw teachers as failures and fuck-ups. "Those who can't do, teach" goes the old saw. But where that traditionally bespoke a suspicion of fancy ideas that didn't produce anything concrete, in my fancy suburb, it meant something else. Teachers had opted out of the capitalist game; they weren't in this world for money. There could be only one reason for that: they were losers. They were dimwitted, unambitious, complacent, unimaginative, and risk-averse. They were middle class.

No one, we were sure, became a teacher because she loved history or literature and wanted to pass that on to the next generation. All of them simply had no other choice. How did we know that? Because they weren't lawyers or doctors or "businessmen"—one of those words, even in the post-Madmen era, still spoken with veneration and awe. It was a circular argument, to be sure, but its circularity merely reflected the closed universe of assumption in which we operated.

Like my teachers, I have chosen a career in education and don't make a lot of money. Unlike them, I'm a professor. I'm continuously astonished at the pass that gets me among the people I grew up with. Had I chosen to be a high-school teacher, I'd be just another loser. But tenured professors are different. Especially if we teach in elite schools (which I don't.) We're more talented, more refined, more ambitious—more like them. We're capitalist tools, too.

So that's where and how I grew up. And when I hear journalists and commentators, many of them fresh out of the Ivy League, talking to teachers as if they were servants trying to steal the family silver, that's what I hear. It's an ugly tone from ugly people.

Every so often I want to ask them, "Didn't your parents teach you better manners?" Then I remember whom I'm dealing with.

Update (September 13, 12:45 am)

I've gotten a fair amount of flak from liberals, on Twitter and in the comments, who claim I'm being unfair to liberal critics of the teachers union—I'm not taking their arguments seriously, making assumptions about their elitism, etc.

I want you all to have a listen to one liberal critic—Andy Rotherham, who has a column at Time— on the Diane Rehm Show. This is what he says (at 50:30):

Part of this strike, it's pretty clear, is that the union needed to have some theater for its members, let them blow off some steam, and that's increasingly obvious.

Remember, he's talking about a union led by an African-American woman, in a school district where 40 percent of the kids are black. Look at `em all, blowing off steam.

Yeah, I was really being unfair.

(Also on the show is the indispensable Diane Ravitch, who does a pretty excellent job — when Rehm lets her speak — of debunking the liberal shibboleths in this debate. If you're wondering why I don't engage the arguments more, it's because Ravitch already has. Again and again and again and again.)



http://schrammjourney.blogspot.com/2012_03_01_archive.html



—Friends of the Middle,
Steven W. Baker (SteveB), Editor/Moderator

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