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Hazardous Times Ahead

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I worry that by the time [Obama](#) ▼ is through with us, the U.S. will be a second-class country. A lot of people feel the same way. A similar concern has been in the back of my mind for years. In the Carter era I also worried about the fate of the country, but I have to say that the hazards seem far greater now.

After the Berlin Wall came down I thought the obvious lesson-that socialism doesn't work- would penetrate the skulls of our domestic intelligentsia. But somehow it never did. They never regard a limit to government expansion as a desirable thing. Nothing seems to have been learned from the fall of Communism-the great history lesson of the 20th century.

Consider health care, much in the news. When I first came to America, people would inquire about Britain's "socialized medicine." Their tone was politely skeptical. Was it really free? Well, no. You're not charged when you go to the doctor, but everyone pays because taxes are much higher. The National Health Service was introduced in 1948 (it now employs more than 1.3 million people), and before that, if you went to the doctor, you paid for the service. To blunt the blow of misfortune there was private insurance, and doctors recognized a moral obligation of charity toward the indigent.

Today, almost everyone will acknowledge that America's private health system delivers better services than the state does in Europe. ("Formerly private," I should have said.) Don't forget, the Soviet Union also had "free" medical care, and good luck if you went to a doctor in Leningrad. Maybe things have improved now that it's St. Petersburg again. Yet today, with little sense of déjà vu, America is moving toward nationalized health. [Obama](#) ▼ made "a promise" of "affordable high-quality care available to every American." The thrust of politics will be to make health care much more expensive for the nation as a whole, and of lower quality-without intending any such decline.

A few words about education: Until the 19th century, it too was something that the customer paid for. By the 1870s, however, all states were providing "free" elementary education. Today, private schooling has become a much more valuable good than it was 50 years ago, when government schools still functioned properly. They had not yet collapsed under the influence of teacher unions, progressive politics, and the decline of the family. So government schooling remained a viable alternative.

Even today, in the better suburbs vigilant parents have been able to maintain standards to some extent by keeping close track of what goes on in school. The true victims of public education are the inner-city poor, where all liberal reforms have worked to their disadvantage. A comparable trend may well reappear with universal health care. I sometimes wonder whether progressive elites really care about education. My suspicions were aroused when I read in a book by Robert Conquest that Lenin said he didn't care about the education of the Soviet masses, disavowing Communist propaganda on the issue. All Lenin cared about was whether the proles could understand and obey the Party's instructions.

Do the liberals care about our chaotic urban schools today? No doubt some do. But effective action would mean challenging unions and the whole progressive mindset. As long as the unions keep delivering the votes, they will continue to exercise a major influence over the Democratic Party and will be allowed to run their own show-whether or not the inner-city kids learn to read or write. The recent shutdown of the voucher program in D.C. showed that the education of poor blacks is not an important consideration for the establishment.

Obama ▼ surely does understand that instructing inner-city blacks has become a big problem. But he will only be able to do something about it only if it becomes his top priority. That is not going to happen—other issues will always be more urgent. Instead he will preserve the comfortable fiction that education can be reformed by increasing the dollars appropriated for it.

Let me also say something about the energy madness that engulfs us. Here lies the real threat to America. The carefully stoked fears about "climate change" and "energy independence" have the potential to do real harm. Liberals really believe that oil and coal will have to make way for renewables, notably wind and solar, and they believe that this transformation can happen within a few years. They think goodwill can surmount all problems.

The potential for harm was increased when the Environmental Protection Agency ruled that carbon dioxide threatens our health and welfare. Before that a prudent delay had seemed likely, but the EPA may push Congress into something really foolish.

I WAS FRUSTRATED BY GEORGE BUSH on the energy front. He failed to confront the bogus science of global warming and he tiptoed around nuclear power. He favored it, but quietly, as though hoping to avoid arousing the opposition. But you either confront the anti-nukes directly or they will defeat you. When irrational fears drive policy, only full-bore presidential power can turn things around.

The same was true of global warming. Bush never accepted that it was man-made, yet he didn't confront it, even though the scientific support for the warmists' claim is abysmal. It's a house of cards that could have collapsed (and could still) with the right opposition. But Bush didn't want to stick his neck out, and that meant the "warm-mongers" won.

Now we find ourselves in the murky waters of cap and trade. A bill that hits the manufacturing, oil, and coal-producing states with higher taxes will be resisted by lots of Democrats as well as Republicans. But the relevant congressional chairmen are leftist ideologues—Reps. Waxman and Markey and Sen. Boxer—determined to impose big penalties on CO2 emitters. No one knows how this will play out. I was cheered the other day when the president of the **Cato Institute**, Bill Niskanen, told me that cap and trade won't pass the Senate. The Democrats just could end up hoist on their own petard.

The propaganda on behalf of "renewables" has been so misleading that most Americans—probably a sizable majority—have no idea how far we are from being able to replace coal, oil, and natural gas with politically correct power sources (which don't include hydropower). Al Gore actually called for all of the nation's electricity to come from wind and solar within a decade. Currently, only 1 percent does. **Obama** ▼ wants 10 percent of electricity to come from these sources by the end of his first term, but that too is a fantasy.

Late in the day, some journalists have begun drawing attention to problems with renewables. It was as though they had found out about them for the first time. Climate change advocate Juliet Eilperin reported on page one of the Washington Post that wind and solar projects "may carry costs for wildlife." The land area needed for renewable energy is far greater than that required by traditional energy sources, she reported. If a nuclear power plant occupies one square mile, for example, 15 square miles would be needed to generate the same power by solar technology and 30 square miles for wind power (according to the Post).

Those ratios struck me as far too low, minimizing the problem. I checked with Howard Hayden, a physicist who puts out a newsletter called The Energy Advocate. For wind farms, he told me, the year-round average output "translates into 300 square miles per 1,000 megawatts, the size of a nuke." So it seems the Post reduced this particular renewable problem (there are many others) by a factor of 10.

Just about everything we have been told about renewable energy is a fantasy, but that doesn't mean the Democrats won't try to cram it down our throats. So get ready for difficult times ahead, and pray for the country.