

Cambridge University scientists have identified the genes which enable two unrelated species of butterfly to have identical looking ...

KIEV (AP) — Ukraine's Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has refused to concede the presidential race to opposition leader ...

CHICAGO (Reuters) — Being an older mother significantly increases the risk of having a child with autism, but being an older father ...

FOREIGN VIEW



America is not yet lost

By Paul Krugman



We've always known that America's reign as the world's greatest nation would eventually end. But most of us imagined that our downfall, when it came, would be something grand and tragic.

What we're getting instead is less a tragedy than a deadly farce. Instead of fraying under the strain of imperial overstretch, we're paralyzed by procedure. Instead of re-enacting the decline and fall of Rome, we're re-enacting the dissolution of 18th-century Poland.

A brief history lesson: In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Polish legislature, the Sejm, operated on the unanimity principle: any member could nullify legislation by shouting "I do not allow!" This made the nation largely ungovernable, and neighboring regimes began hacking off pieces of its territory. By 1795 Poland had disappeared, not to re-emerge for more than a century.

Today, the U.S. Senate seems determined to make the Sejm look good by comparison.

Last week, after nine months, the Senate finally approved Martha Johnson to head the General Services Administration, which runs government buildings and purchases supplies. It's an essentially nonpolitical position, and nobody questioned Ms. Johnson's qualifications: she was approved by a vote of 94 to 2. But Senator Christopher Bond, Republican of Missouri, had put a "hold" on her appointment to pressure the government into approving a building project in Kansas City.

This dubious achievement may have inspired Senator Richard Shelby, Republican of Alabama. In any case, Mr. Shelby has now placed a hold on all outstanding Obama administration nominations — about 70 high-level government positions — until his state gets a tanker contract and a counterterrorism center.

What gives individual senators this kind of power? Much of the Senate's business relies on unanimous consent: it's difficult to get anything done unless everyone agrees on procedure. And a tradition has grown up under which senators, in return for not gumming up everything, get the right to block nominees they don't like.

In the past, holds were used sparingly. That's because, as a Congressional Research Service report on the practice says, the Senate used to be ruled by "traditions of comity, courtesy, reciprocity, and accommodation." But that was then. Rules that used to be workable have become crippling now that one of the nation's major political parties has descended into nihilism, seeing no harm — in fact, political dividends — in making the nation ungovernable.

How bad is it? It's so bad that I miss Newt Gingrich. Readers may recall that in 1995 Mr. Gingrich, then speaker of the House, cut off the federal government's funding and forced a temporary government shutdown. It was ugly and extreme, but at least Mr. Gingrich had sharp demands: he wanted Bill Clinton to agree to sharp cuts in Medicare.

Today, by contrast, the Republican leaders refuse to offer any specific proposals. They inveigh against the deficit — and last month their senators voted in lockstep against any increase in the federal debt limit, a move that would have precipitated another government shutdown if Democrats hadn't had 60 votes. But they also denounce anything that might actually reduce the deficit, including, ironically, any effort to spend Medicare funds more wisely.

And with the national G.O.P. having abdicated any responsibility for making things work, it's only natural that individual senators should feel free to take the nation hostage until they get their pet projects funded.

The truth is that given the state of American politics, the way the Senate works is no longer consistent with a functioning government. Senators themselves should recognize this fact and push through changes in those rules, including eliminating or at least limiting the filibuster. This is something they could and should do, by majority vote, on the first day of the next Senate session.

Don't hold your breath. As it is, Democrats don't even seem able to score political points by highlighting their opponents' obstructionism.

It should be a simple message (and it should have been the central message in Massachusetts): a vote for a Republican, no matter what you think of him as a person, is a vote for paralysis. But by now, we know how the Obama administration deals with those who would destroy it: it goes straight for the capillaries. Sure enough, Robert Gibbs, the White House press secretary, accused Mr. Shelby of "silliness." Yep, that will really resonate with voters.

After the dissolution of Poland, a Polish officer serving under Napoleon penned a song that eventually — after the country's post-World War I resurrection — became the country's national anthem. It begins, "Poland is not yet lost."

Well, America is not yet lost. But the Senate is working on it.

(Source: New York Times)

Egypt at democratic crossroads

By Adel Safty

Two recent events have caught the attention of the Egyptian media and fed speculation about the 2011 presidential election in Egypt.

First there was the sensational announcement by Mohamed Mostafa ElBaradei the former director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency in response to a campaign by young Egyptians calling on him to run for president. Elbaradei said he would only run on condition that the election be supervised by the judiciary and monitored by the international community.

Second, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was reported by Al Ahram newspaper to have said, in an interview with the Police magazine, that he wanted the elections to be "free and fair." He also said that the presidential election would be open to "anyone who can bring benefit to Egypt."

Given the respect Elbaradei enjoys in the international community and his apparent commitment to reform, social justice, and respect for human rights, he may represent the most serious challenge to Mubarak's 29 years of uncontested reign.

But this challenge can be turned into an opportunity because it offers Mubarak a unique chance to steal the thunder of his critics and would-be reformers and in the process profoundly affect the course of events and indelibly shape his legacy.

Here are some ideas to promote a legacy of democracy and social peace that Mubarak can easily implement.

First, follow up on the verbal promises made recently about free and fair elections by accommodating the demand for judicial supervision and international monitoring of the 2011 presidential election. This will not impinge on the dignity of Egypt or its sovereignty; on the contrary it will enhance both.

Second, remove the constitutional limitations on eligibility that heavily favor the candidates approved by the establishment and handicap outsiders such as Elbaradei. This will demonstrate self-confidence and faith in the ability of the people to make the right choice.

Third, announce that no military experience is needed for the job of president. Egypt has been ruled for almost 60 years by three presidents who were all military officers. None of them were elected by the people, except for Mubarak, who won re-election in a landslide victory in the 2005 election the first contested presidential election in Egypt although the result was disputed by critics and opposition.

In a free and fair election no military officer is likely to be elected president for the simple reason that none enjoys enough popular support to win without the intervention of the ruling party machine or the direct intervention of Mubarak himself; Mubarak could for instance appoint a military officer, or someone like the intelligence chief Omar Sulaiman, to be his vice-president, and thus pave the way for a continuation of military rule in Egypt. Or Mubarak could underscore his believe in democratic governance by becoming the first Egyptian president to usher in civilian rule and affirm the supremacy of civilian authority over the military. Fourth, clear the air once and for all and dispel the growing rumors that Mubarak is grooming his son Jamal to succeed him in office.

Last year Mubarak told American television viewers, in an interview with Charlie Rose, that "This was never raised between my son and myself ... It is not on my mind to have my son inherit me..."

Fair and free elections should be subject to rules and procedures to ensure that no unfair advantage is given to the ruling party candidate in terms of access to the media, to the government's vast resources, and use of the security forces.

In this regard, opposition figure Ayman Nour, who ran against President Mubarak in the 2005, announced late last year that he would sue Jamal Mubarak in Cairo's Supreme Administrative Court on charges of "using the privileges of executive power without



Former IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei, seen here on Dec. 4, 2009 in Vienna, announced last year that he would run for president of Egypt if the election is supervised by the judiciary and monitored by the international community. (Reuters photo)

constitutional rights".

Fifth, unequivocally commit to supremacy of rule of law, especially in terms of protection of human rights, freedom of assembly and peaceful protest. Those arrested during anti-government demonstrations or on suspicion of belonging to illegal organizations should either be charged or released. Democracy has no room for political prisoners.

In this regard the election last month of the moderate Mohammad Badi to the post of the Muslim Brothers' 'supreme guide' is noteworthy. Badi said in his acceptance speech that he believed in peaceful, democratic action. Social peace requires dialogue and conciliation even with banned organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Economy

Sixth, announce and immediately implement a vast program of social justice based not so much on International Monetary Fund criteria for economic development, but on compassion for the growing numbers of poor and less privileged.

"The economic decline is serious," says Abdul Halim Qandil, editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper Sawt Al Umma, and speaker for the opposition movement Kifaya.

"In 1973 the Egyptian economy was still on a par with (that of) South Korea. Today South Korea is in 10th place, and we are number 122." The unbearably high cost of living, the interminably long lines before bakeries still selling subsidized bread, and the repression with which anti-government demonstrations were met have resulted in a high level of frustration and anger. A government that remains insensitive to the plight of the people cannot claim to be representative of the people.

Seventh, provide unstinting support for the transformation of Egypt from a security state the hallmark of military rule to a civil-society state, the indispensable foundation of democratic governance.

Disasters and accidents have been occurring in Egypt with alarming regularity: trains catch fire, buses plunge into rivers and buildings collapse without warning. One recent example may serve to illustrate the current state of affairs in Egypt. Last year, when several buildings collapsed in a popular district in Cairo, the security forces, anxious to contain people's anger, were on the scene within the hour. It took the rescue services six hours to show up.

The task is challenging, but the potential rewards for a legacy of democracy and social peace are as enormous as they are uplifting.

Adel Safty, who was born in Egypt, and educated in France and England, is a distinguished professor adjunct at the Siberian Academy of Public Administration in Russia.

(Source: Gulf News)

Obama's 2010 strategy taking shape

By Steve Holland

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — U.S. President Barack Obama's campaign strategy for Democrats in the November elections is taking shape — appeal to Republicans to make compromises and if they do not, accuse them of obstruction.

Obama is basically angling to call the bluff of Republicans who he believes have done nothing but stand in opposition to his proposals on revamping the U.S. healthcare system and stimulating the economy.

It is a strategy he is outlining in town-hall meetings and most recently at Democratic fund-raising events he held last week, as he seeks to regain his political footing after Democrats lost their 60-vote supermajority in the Senate.

"I told my Republican friends I want to work together with them where I can — and I meant it," Obama said at a Democratic event on Thursday. "And I told them I will also call them out if they say they want to work on something then when I offer a hand, I get nothing in return."

By the same token, Republicans are expressing a willingness to work with Obama — up to a point — and are interested to see if he really is willing to agree to some of their priorities.

Sensing they stand to make big gains in congressional elections in November, they are in no mood to agree to anything that would raise taxes or increase government spending and budget deficits.

"Republicans will not blindly abandon our commitment to the American people and throw out our principles," said the top Republican in the House of Representatives, John Boehner.

And they are also wary of Obama, suspecting his newfound willingness to talk to them is a political ploy aimed at spotlighting their initiatives and ridiculing them.

Obama's pledge to seek unity will be put to the test as early as this week. On Tuesday he hosts Democratic and Republican leaders from the House and Senate at the White House for talks on jobs and the economy.

Producing results

Democratic leaders are pushing a multibillion-dollar jobs bill that is expected to seek an extension of unemployment benefits and aid to beleaguered state budgets, among other items.

Republicans want to see Obama hold true to pledges made in his



OBAMA

State of the Union speech and seek measures to build more nuclear plants, increase offshore oil exploration and take steps to increase U.S. exports such as entering into foreign trade agreements.

Obama and his Democrats, struggling to bring down the country's 9.7 percent jobless rate and having seen their healthcare overhaul stalled, are eager to prove to Americans they can generate results ahead of the November elections.

"Voters are looking for results," said political analyst Dave Wasserman of the Cook Political Report. "Right now they're frustrated that they're not seeing bipartisan results."

Mindful that independent voters want to see bipartisanship and are disenchanted with Obama, Republicans are under pressure to prove they can join in governing, ahead of elections in which more than a third of the 100 Senate seats and all 435 House seats are at stake.

Some see a potential for agreement on a scaled-backed healthcare initiative.

"I would love to see a small-scale, sensible, centrist healthcare initiative get passed this summer," said Ari Fleischer, who was press secretary to Republican President George W. Bush. "I still would like to see progress get made wherever the center can hold on modest initiatives. But I think there's no taste for anything major."

The party in power typically loses seats in the first election after a new president takes office, and Democrats are in a defensive mode after Republican Scott Brown last month won a Senate seat in Massachusetts held for decades by Democrats.

The Cook Political Report's latest forecast said Republicans stand to gain four to six Senate seats and 25 to 35 seats in the House.

That is not enough for Republicans to gain control of either chamber but sufficient to give them a louder voice and force Obama to take greater notice of their priorities.

"It's never OK to decide the outcome of an election nine months away. But there are few signs that Democrats have an easy way out of this," Wasserman said.

University of Texas political scientist Bruce Buchanan said with the country locked in recession and facing other staggering problems, it can only help to have the two sides talking.

FOREIGN EDITORIAL

U.S. and China: Tetchy twins

By The Guardian

A year ago, China Daily gushed with upbeat epithets about the cooperation between the U.S. and China. The relationship was already effective and smooth on trade, Taiwan and global warming. With two firm multilateralists, Barack Obama and Joe Biden, now in power, it would be positively strengthened and constructive, the official mouthpiece opined.

How different the picture looks today -- and how wounded the official tone. China sent a deputy foreign minister to negotiate with Mr. Obama in Copenhagen, scuppering the deal that not just the U.S. but many other countries wanted. Next came the cyber-attacks on Google. Then the White House approved a decision to sell patriot missiles to Taiwan, announced that Mr. Obama would meet the Dalai Lama and lectured China on its overvalued currency. Forget the metaphor of resetting relations, which the U.S. used recently with Russia. Hardly a month goes by when the U.S. and China can resist pushing each other's buttons.

Is China's assertiveness and Mr. Obama's hardened attitude all down to economics -- to the former's impressive performance during the global recession and the latter's much weaker one? Economists reckon the Chinese currency, which has remained at the same value since July 2008, is undervalued by 25% to 40%. Even on the lower figure, the effect of a correction on the currencies of neighbors like Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan would be major and would collectively help cut the U.S. deficit by \$100 billion and create 700,000 jobs. Reopening the battle with China over its currency is not a bad move, therefore, as Mr. Obama faces difficult midterm elections in November. Both the U.S. and China are trying to power their way forward with export booms and each requires a low valuation of its currency to do that.

But politics matter too. China's foreign policy has become more assertive as nationalism becomes dominant. For all the lip service to multilateralism, China is more hostile to sanctions on Iran than Russia. A nationalist China is, however, more tied into the global economy than ever before. Two-thirds of China's \$2.4 trillion currency reserves are held in dollars. If it dumped the U.S. treasury bonds and shares in which these dollars are invested, China could trigger a collapse of the dollar, and world markets, and another global recession. To whom would China be able to export then? Certainly not to the U.S. or the EU. China's key economic interest lies in continuing to fund U.S. debt.

So there are limits to the current U.S.-China jousting. Each is repainting its red lines and stepping over the other's. But at some point national interest says this must stop. Neither of the tetchy twins can do without the other.