The Wrong Man at the Right Place at the Right Time: Stupidity in History

The Village Politicians by John Lewis Krimmel, c. 1819

by Armando Simón (January 2022)

The way historians look at conflicts in history—both violent and nonviolent conflicts—is pictured as similar to a chess game between two leaders, calculating moves and countermoves, two or three moves in advance. At no point do historians take into consideration the possibility—actually, the fact—that at least one of those opponents may be stupid. Aside from this "chessmasters" belief is also the fact that such a crude description of a historical figure is considered crass, even though they themselves will describe

a *contemporary* politician, or prominent figure, to friends or acquaintances as being a stupid jackass.

Such an idea seems counterintuitive. After all, how could a person become head of a country, a ministry, a university, or an army if he is stupid? Actually, it's simple. First, in the case of hereditary aristocracy, it can be through simple genetics. For example, just as Prussia's Frederick the Great was a multifaceted genius, Spain's Carlos II was a mental and physical defective. Second, in non-aristocratic settings, it can be through a single-minded, unprincipled, lust for power. Several dictators easily come to mind (their stupidity is usually overshadowed by their evil). Third, it can be because of ideology. Fanaticism, particularly totalitarian fanaticism, has a tendency to halve a person's IQ, such that the ideology distorts reality in order to conform to that ideology. Think of Mao's great Leap Forward, or Castro's numerous projects, or even on a smaller scale, such as Jonestown. Lastly, stupidity in leaders can come through the banal fact of lifelong work and ultimate ascendancy in a bureaucracy (which is why the ruling class of all countries are gerontocracies). Viewing this last in American history, think of lifelong politicians like Gerald Ford, or George Bush, Sr., who were picked as Vice-Presidents and ended up as presidents of the United States, or, in the present day, Generals Lloyd Austin and Mark Milley.

At any rate, many years ago, back when I was younger and thought I had all the time in the world, I conceived of several projects that I should carry out in the future. Then I blinked and then realized that my time had pretty much ran out. One of these projects was a history book that I was going to compile about the crucial role of stupidity in history (it promised to be a very thick book).

I got as far as the title: *The Role of Stupidity in Human History.*

As it turns out, that “very thick book” will become, instead, an article. And because this is an article, and not a book, the incidents described below will be highly condensed and the impact of the stupidity displayed may not be appreciated. Likewise, and for the same reason, although their numbers would be such as to make it a multi-volume work, I will relate just a handful.

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(A) In 1220, Frederick became Emperor Frederick II, whereupon he vowed to launch a crusade for the Holy Land. His holdings were widespread and his intellect was breathtaking. Pope Gregory IX developed an obsessive hatred for the Emperor, excommunicating him three times, even though Frederick launched a crusade which captured Jerusalem. The Pope waged wars against the emperor, energies and bellicosity which would have been more rationally directed at permanently securing the Middle East.

(B) It is rare that a battle goes perfectly according to plan. It is equally rare for *everything* going wrong in a battle. Such was the case with Girón Beach, *aka* Bay of Pigs (likewise, during the Spanish Civil War, Eby’s *Comrades and Commissars* detail a long, uninterrupted litany of stupidity on that battlefield). U-2 photographs of dark areas in the landing zone were identified as reefs by the Cuban exiles who had lived there; their CIA officers ignored their experience, insisting it was seaweed; the landing crafts got stuck in the “seaweed;” supplies could not be unloaded. Even the obvious advice of a marine not to stock the gasoline and the ammunition together was ignored. Lifeboats were rotten. Diversions elsewhere In Cuba did not take place. The invaders were to be protected by an air umbrella; half the air strikes were called off by President Kennedy and General Cabell at the crucial moment. Planes strafed both sides. Kennedy and Cabell refused to resupply and chose to abandon them. And even though

everyone knew that the US government was obviously behind the invasion, it expected that everyone would believe that it was neutral.

(C) Athens and Sparta had just ended a war with a draw. Alcibiades was an exceedingly charismatic and intelligent young man, an orator, and he convinced the Athenians to attack Syracuse, whereupon they would all become rich. Nicias, known to be cautious and hesitant, with occasional bouts of energy and efficiency, wanted peace, but was appointed leader of the expedition. Upon reaching Sicily, he procrastinated, thereby demoralizing their huge army. He also became sick. The Syracusans attacked them with some success. He ultimately decided to return to Athens, but a lunar eclipse took place just then and Nicias thought it a bad omen, so he postponed the evacuation with the result that the whole Athenian army was captured. From that point on, Athens' decline plummeted.

(D) Japan was at war with China and occupied Indochina when France collapsed to German invasion. At the time, Americans were besotted with China, mostly due to maudlin novels by Pearl Buck and were simultaneously revolted by Japanese atrocities in Nanking, so FDR instituted an oil embargo. Whereupon Japan's Tojo decided that it would be a good idea to attack America—without a declaration of war—at Pearl Harbor. What could go wrong?

(E) In the late 1970s, at one time there was an American bureaucracy in the federal government that was established in order to exterminate bobcats (lynxes). Simultaneously, another federal bureau existed for the purpose of protecting the very same animal.

(F) When the fanatics took over Iran, they were incensed that the United States had supported the Shah and often held demonstrations in front of the US embassy. When a massive mob of fanatics breached the embassy walls and were trying to get inside, the staff locked the doors and hunkered down, with the

guards arming themselves as the diplomats shredded documents. At one point one senior, stupid, officer insisted on going outside "to reason with them," whereupon the fanatics grabbed him and yelled to the staff that they would kill him if the doors were not opened. He screamed in terror to open the doors. In yet another act of stupidity, for his sake they opened the doors and the mob poured in, resulting in the staff being captured and held hostage for over a year, with the captors wallowing in the publicity and making bizarre demands.

As the American embassy in Tehran was being besieged, six diplomats in an adjoining building were able to escape. The Canadian embassy sheltered them and a plan was made to smuggle them out with fake passports and visas. Fortunately, one of the Canadians spotted a blunder in the passports: the date was in the normal calendar as opposed to what it should have been, namely the Muslim calendar. Ultimately, they were able to escape.

(G) There is a long, long history of foreign animal species being imported into this country either accidentally, or on purpose, which spread to the detriment of the native habitats. For example, Florida has seen a number of pythons take to the wild, causing ecological havoc in the Everglades. Lionfish were brought into Florida for aquariums and someone dumped lionfish in the Caribbean, whereupon they spread everywhere. Journey up the road near Tupelo, Mississippi, and one will see luscious vegetation. It is very pretty until one realizes that it is only one type of plant—kudzu— and it is everywhere. It has choked up plants and trees and climbs up lampposts and dead tree trunks with rapidity. Asian carp, a voracious species, gained a foothold, or rather an finhold, in one of the rivers and, unchecked, it spread. Journalists ran several television stories on it—not alarming stories, but humorous stories—because the fish leap dramatically out of the water when they hear the outboard of a boat. They thought it hilarious, particularly if someone got injured. To this day,

lawmakers have not outlawed the importation of all exotic species, nor have they set up the necessary bureaucracy to exterminate the invasive species.

(H) During WW I, General Ludendorff remarked, “The English fight like lions.” “Yes,” a staff officer replied, “but they are led by donkeys.” Throughout the 20th century, this was consistently the case, as British generals were stupid while their soldiers were excellent. But among these generals, there was one who stood head and shoulders above his colleagues in stupidity: Bernard Freyberg. Picture this: Mainland Greece was occupied by the Nazis. British troops were in Crete having retreated from the mainland. Thanks to Bletchley Park, the British knew the exact day of the German invasion and the exact targets. The attack vitally depended on surprise. Freyberg was informed the enemy would invade by air and they would try to secure three (named) airfields in order to fly in reinforcements. But Freyberg ignored the intelligence reports, obsessed that it would be a seaborne invasion. On May 20, the sound of airplanes was followed by troops landing on the western tip. Freyberg was not surprised at all by the attack, making a remark that he had been expecting it. Some of the landings went awry and many parachutists were mauled. The few local defenders, about to be overwhelmed but putting up a terrific resistance, repeatedly asked for reinforcements and for the coastal naval guns turn to shell the invaders. Freyberg denied the request, wanting the guns for the naval invasion—which never came. He also refused to deploy his reserves. Even so, the German casualties were horrendous, with the Cretans going at the invaders like pit bulls. Nonetheless, German reinforcements arrived and Freyberg did nothing—except order a withdrawal from Crete. The soldiers were left behind to be taken prisoner, while officers were evacuated. The postscript is that even though the invasion was aided by the British general’s stupidity, the casualties were so high that Hitler forbade future air invasions.

(I) Mexican president Antonio de Santa Ana abolished the Constitution of 1824 and rejected federalism, with the result that several provinces revolted or broke away and had to be suppressed for many years thereafter (the Mexican Federalist War). One of them was Texas, which had a sizeable number of immigrants from America. Their numbers were few and were poorly armed. Logic would have dictated not to confront the large Mexican army and, instead, play for time in order to become stronger, especially after the defeats earlier at Goliad (where prisoners were executed) and elsewhere. Instead, 200 rebels voluntarily trapped themselves at the Alamo mission in San Antonio and took no measures to resist a possible siege, even though they had received reports that the Mexican army was on its way. On top of that, two incompetent egomaniacs, James Bowie and William Travis, vied for leadership. After being defeated, all surviving Alamo defenders were executed.

If that was not stupid enough, to this day Texans look back on the Alamo fiasco with pride.

A postscript: prior to the Battle of San Jacinto, Santa Ana stupidly made camp in a vulnerable position, contrary to his officers' advice, additionally underestimating any potential enemy forces and divesting himself of most of his army. His army was attacked, the soldiers massacred as payback for the Goliad and Alamo massacres, and Santa Ana was captured.

(J) Contemporary events will ultimately become historical, of course, so the COVID-19 fiasco has to be mentioned. An illness was early on acknowledged to have a survival rate of 99.9% but was portrayed by politicians and the media as being the equivalent of the Black Death. Logic and common sense vanished. People lined up waiting for hours to be tested—because they had no symptoms. A six-foot "social distance" became the norm, the brainchild of a teenage girl, against epidemiologists' recommendation. The media, in particular, was guilty of *deliberately and*

consistently misrepresenting the fatality of the illness. Mortality rates were *deliberately falsified* so that persons who died from other causes were declared to have died from COVID. They wore face masks made with fibers to guard against a virus, which was like installing a barbed wire fence to prevent mosquitoes, and became angry, even violent, with those who did not wear a mask, not asking themselves that if the masks were so effective why did they get upset if others did not, and, on the other hand, if the masks were useless, why did others have to wear them? They wore these masks inside their homes, in parks and beaches—though informed that sunlight killed the virus. Conformity was insisted upon. The "six-week lockdown to flatten the curve" became a year. A lot of people lost their livelihood—except the politicians and journalists that were fanning the panic who kept getting paid—and who did not wear masks when there were no cameras around. Then, came the vaccine which had deadly side effects. People who took the vaccine and were supposedly immune continued to wear masks. They also insisted that others become vaccinated, which brought up the question: if the vaccines worked so well, why did others have to comply, and if they didn't work, why did others have to be vaccinated? In other words, vaccinated persons were protected from COVID, but not from the unvaccinated. Logic or common sense simply did not penetrate these people. Worst of all was the deliberate jettisoning of basic rights, from the right to assembly, to free speech and freedom to worship. The politicians—Americans, Canadians, Australians, Italians, British, French—got in touch with their inner dictator, the media supported them, and the sophists justified it. As one wag put it, "Imagine a vaccine so safe that you have to be threatened to take it—for a disease so deadly you have to be tested to know if you have it."

I could go on and on about other historical instances (and I have not even touched upon intellectual stupidity, as

exemplified by Freudian psychoanalysis, free verse, CRT, the present-day transgender movement and Marxism) but, again, there are space constraints. However, let me say that while it is usually the case that one of the major participants demonstrates his stupidity, on occasion opposing opponents are in the same boat (Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush come to mind).

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The above is not just amusing for history buffs, but has greater significance. Stupidity comes into play in Historiography. Marxist Historiography would have one believe that individuals, and "incidentals," are irrelevant to history (there is a certain attitude of pre-destination in Marxist Historiography). What counts is masses. The irony here is that Marxists were, and are, famous for glorifying certain individuals (Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro) to the point of creating cults of personality.

I have argued otherwise: history is biography. For example, is it possible to relate the American War of Independence without naming a single individual, or his personality?

On August 22, 1939, Hitler told his staff that the reason for starting a war rested on two factors: his "personality" [his word] and that of Mussolini's; all other European heads of states were peace-loving nonentities. Contrary to what you may have been informed by pseudo-historians, the only person in Germany that wanted war was Hitler—the *only* one.

In Historiography, Thomas Carlyle is the name most associated with The Great Men of History Theory, which is that all important historical events and historical periods are the result of the actions and words of outstanding men. A very good case can be made for that theory. In recent history of the United States, we saw John McCain be the sole vote that

derailed the tearing down of Obamacare and Senator Joe Manchin cast the sole vote that also derailed the Build Back Better bill which would have accelerated the country into bankruptcy. In both instances, they resisted enormous pressure from their parties, their colleagues and the president.

A similarly good case can also be made for The Stupid Men of History Theory. Paradoxically and counterintuitively, some men who are very stupid nonetheless acquired positions of responsibility during crucial moments in history. After all, History would have been totally different if the above individuals had not been so stupid: Crete could have been held by the British (their first actual, morale-boosting victory) and Hitler would have had to postpone Operation Barbarossa; Fidel Castro could have been overthrown, or a Cuban Civil War have occurred, Athens could have triumphed and become so powerful that Sparta would have never defeated her, Japan could have looked for other sources of oil and thereby avoided defeat of all its forces so the USA would not have been dragged into WWII. There is a wonderful phrase in English: the right man at the right place at the right time. The opposite applies as well: the wrong man at the right place at the right time (Nicias, George W. Bush, Kennedy, Freyberg, etc.).

This thesis should not come as a surprise once you realize that stupidity is all around us.

And then, there are the "incidentals," which further brings doubt on the inevitability of Marxist Historiography: There was heavy rain the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, which delayed and hampered Napoleon's attack. If the rain had not occurred, he might have defeated Wellington, then wheeled about to smash Blucher who galloped in at the climax of the battle. In October 11, 1492, Columbus saw a faint glow on the western horizon, which he interpreted as coming from land. In truth, a swarm of luminescent marine worms had surfaced to mate, which it does like clockwork every year at the same time. Perhaps the exasperated sailors would have tossed

Columbus—a foreigner—overboard if no light had been sighted. And then, there was Nicias' lunar eclipse. If it had not occurred, he would have safely evacuated the entire army.

All of these fall in the realm of "what might have been." Historical events are not inevitable. They only seem inevitable in hindsight.

One last point. The idea of famous people, either historical or contemporary, being stupid may seem droll, their actions often result in other people losing their lives. Something to give one nightmares is the fact that in the nuclear age, the policy of MADD is dependent on the participants being rational and intelligent, instead of stupid or fanatical.

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