

Schlimmbesserung



by Armando Simón

Schlimmbesserung is a lovely German word which means making something worse by trying to improve it.

Americans' ignorance of other countries, their cultures, their history and their geography is legendary and world renowned and the subject of countless anecdotes and jokes by foreigners. This ignorance is inexplicable, as it is not found in America's northern or the southern neighbors, so it cannot be due to geographical isolation. It is also a fact that foreigners know more about America than Americans know of their countries. Or even their own.

It is also a paradox. One would expect logically that a country that is principally composed of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants would have an encyclopedic knowledge of other countries, as is the case with Britain, which had a world-wide empire. Not so.

And this may explain America's unintentional policy of

schlimbesserung, the worsening of something that it is trying to improve, or as Greene described it so aptly of an American character in one of his novels, “armored in his ignorance and good intentions.”

As an aside, let me also say that this naïve optimism—to put it charitably—has enabled foreign governments to easily steal diplomatic and military secrets with little trouble, according to Gordievsky’s [KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev](#). John [Walker](#), an American traitor who spied for the Russians for 17 years once said in a public interview that Walmart guards a tube of toothpaste better than the Navy guards its secrets. He should know.

Many individual American philanthropists and government bureaucrats go energetically out in the world upon hearing of some terrible condition in some part of the world through the television, convinced that they, yes *they*, can personally correct the situation when in reality they have no idea of what the hell they’re doing are doing, who they are dealing with, or what is really going on in that part of the world, nor of the cultural, historical, and geographical circumstances. Nor can they even speak the local language! They are simply confident that *they* will solve the problem. And so they will feel good about themselves (for example, there is no question in my mind that some dirt-poor African doctors, upon learning that some idiot Americans, obsessed with AIDS, were going to send millions upon millions of dollars in their countries “to combat AIDS,” and having very few actual cases of infected patients, simply falsified the statistics. Or worse.). It is as if they were hopscotching across a cultural minefield with an idiotic grin.

The cultural values that one takes so much for granted that one is not conscious of may not be present elsewhere. For example, Americans do not understand that many countries e.g., Greece, Ireland, tend to explain their present problems by blaming other countries (Turkey, Germany, England) over what

happened centuries ago instead of actually solving the problems. People in other countries are backward looking in that their sights are rigidly focused on their past, whereas Americans' eyes are always on the future (and which might explain why Americans are addicted to science-fiction) while being generally ignorant about their past.

Also, it is a general truism that the majority of persons who run for office in North America and various European countries do so because they sincerely want to help and improve their communities/countries. However, in all of Africa and most of Asia, persons who seek public office do so for one purpose, and one purpose only: to steal everything that they can get away with. So when some ignorant, naïve, American shows up with buckets full of money, oblivious of the culture and the longstanding, entrenched, corruption, and with an announced intention to make the local community more like an American community, they are welcomed with open arms while suppressing their snickering. This also explains something where Americans exhibit willful blindness: other cultures don't play [fair](#). Honesty is seen as the trait of fools. Fools are to be taken advantage of. Especially in trade and diplomacy. Just look at China.

Prior to the Cold War, America's interference in other countries' internal affairs was practically nonexistent outside of the Caribbean where America's preoccupation was with the stability in the region. What went on in Egypt, Thailand, Argentina, or Greece was none of our business, nor did we frankly care. However, having just survived the cataclysm of WWII, and the realization that Communism was a danger bent on world domination, and that each country that became Communist made that possibility much more likely changed that *laissez faire* attitude 180^o. Whereas NATO was formed for the purpose of deterring a military attack on Western Europe by the Soviet Union (the generals mentally fighting the last war as is always the case, not realizing

that the war now was ideological and propagandistic rather than military), diplomats began to question how to best combat Communist insurgencies in the Third World. The arrived (wrong) conclusion was that the reason a country became Communist was because the dirt-poor people were so desperate that they became Marxists in order to improve their lives, so if the West helped poor countries economically Communists could not gain a foothold. As such, they ignored the fact that most Communist movements are organized and headed not by poor people, but by a [cadre](#) of power-hungry middle-class intellectuals.

As has been mentioned, the first approach was with foreign [aid](#). The second was with military intervention, in Korea, Vietnam, Santo Domingo, Grenada, and Lebanon. Although such interventions were mostly successful, they carried a heavy price as American blood was spilled in foreign countries. America's supposed allies hardly helped at all, including the citizens of the countries (Korea and Vietnam) that themselves were in danger of being conquered by Communist forces.

But aside from the blunders committed by the American government, we have the blunders committed by individual Americans, again due to their blind optimism and ignorance of other countries' culture. On a simple level, menial ground troops or business people must, in order to avoid creating hostility, be aware that in some countries simply putting up one's feet on one's desk is very insulting, or that touching another person on the head is a taboo, or that if doing business in some countries silence means agreement, or that if one is invited to a person's home and is offered food or drink it is mandatory to imbibe (and, in Oriental countries taking off the shoes before entering is mandatory—an excellent custom, incidentally), or that for many cultures punctuality is a slippery concept, or that giving or receiving an object from another person by using the left hand is anathema, or that in some countries two men holding hands is a gesture of

friendship and not homosexuality. Additionally, not having any knowledge of that country's foremost poet (a Tagore, Petöfi, Mistral, Martí, Darío or Pushkin) is, in itself, insulting, while showing some genuine interest in that same poet automatically creates enormous goodwill.

Remember when an American car manufacturer put the steering wheels on the wrong side in Japan? Remember when Euro Disney was built on the most obnoxiously anti-American country in Europe? Then prohibited [wine](#) with meals to a people who have a nervous breakdown if the wrong wine is served with their meal? Remember when a second atomic [bomb](#) was dropped in Japan because of a misunderstanding in *one* word in Japan's response to the demand for surrender?

Cultural ignorance can be particularly embarrassing in a President, even be potentially catastrophic. Remember when President Ford insisted that *Poland* was not part of the *Warsaw* Pact and, therefore, a slave to the Soviet Union? Then, there was the otherwise admirable Teddy Roosevelt who ignored the American assurance to Korea pledging to uphold its autonomy when Japan threatened.

An American ambassador to Cambodia, learning that King Sihanouk enjoyed jazz, sent him some jazz records.

In a brown paper bag!

And then sent him the bill!

(I have often wondered what role this little incident may have played in the king going to China and the subsequent triumph of the genocidal Khmer Rouge.)

President Clinton underestimated the Serbs' resistance to relinquish Kosovo, unaware that Kosovo is considered to be the birthplace of Serbia. Worse, drooling praise for "diversity," he pressured the tiny, sparsely populated, country of Macedonia to allow Albanians, the white trash of Europe, to

come into the country. And, in a blatantly transparent effort to derail his impeachment, he bombed Sudan—during Ramadan.

Then, we had the catastrophe of George W. Bush who (being Texan, boasted of not having read a book in years) claimed that at one time America and the United States had been at war but were friends now, and who invaded Iraq on a personal vendetta, ignoring the fact that the America-hating Shiite majority would come into power as a result, and would infuriate our Sunni ally, Saudi Arabia, who saw the Shiites as heretics. He compounded his Middle Eastern policy by arm twisting some of the autocratic countries there to have free elections—in the typically naïve American belief that free elections are a panacea—and was then surprised when the fanatical elements took office. That whole area of the world is dominated by a culture where hysteric is considered eloquence, where incoherent irrationality is seen as logic and where in politics the Anglo-American concepts of “the loyal opposition” and “we can agree to disagree” is inconceivable and those concepts are automatically interpreted as treason. In short, the people in those countries were not going to be transformed into good little Americans.

And this also explains why America’s attempts at nation-building in countries that it has militarily defeated tends to be a fiasco on so many levels (not the least being financially) and why they, instead, become tar babies to America. [One](#) only has to [look](#) at Iraq and [Afghanistan](#) to [realize](#) it.

And how is it possible that no one foresaw that a backlash would occur in Saudi Arabia by having an American (“infidel dogs”) military base in their sacred litter box? Which, on top of defiling the sand with their presence, also had a radio station broadcasting rock and roll *haram* music? Which resulted in the bombing of the American base with loss of lives?

Just as the American occupation of Iraq sparked the creation

of ISIS/Daesh, so did the establishment of a permanent base (yet another military base! thanks to the cancerous Deep State bureaucracy)—spark Osama bin Laden to create al-Qaeda.

Lastly, we have had presidents who have lectured other countries not to persecute gays, not realizing that the media in those countries are not under the control of a comparable Politically Correct cadre of fanatics as is the case in America and so, the people in those countries have not been subjected to decades of pro-homosexual propaganda in television and movies, as has been the case in America, so they continue to view homosexuals as sexual perverts (the president of Uganda correctly said, those attempts are an instance of “cultural imperialism”).

Throughout, Americans, whether as individual citizens, or Presidents, or bureaucrats, no matter how good their intentions, have at times blundered from one fiasco to another after another, believing that if they could only convince other countries of their good intentions then those countries would do everything that we tell them—which makes one muse whether Americans should not be prohibited from leaving their country to wreak havoc overseas. The book *The Ugly American*, and its sequel, *A Nation of Sheep* should be consulted before Americans go overseas (in all fairness, its counterpart, *The Ugly Russian* should also be read for comparison).

Or, better yet, perhaps they should be forced to embrace a principle from one of their popular television shows, *Star Trek*, with its Prime Directive: do not meddle in alien cultures.

Good intentions are simply not an adequate excuse for creating chaos.

Internationally, Americans should just learn to mind their own business.

Armando Simón is originally from Cuba and is a retired psychologist, author of *When Evolution Stops*, *A Cuban from Kansas* and *The Book of Many Books*, as well as numerous stage plays.