

Stupid America

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“The refusal to take the time to understand things in any number of dimensions greater than one is the chief source of the national stupidity.” — Menand, Louis, “Made in the USA”, *The New York Review of Books*, June 26, 1997, p. 8.

“Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens” (“With stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain.”) — Schiller, Friedrich von, quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 415.

Introduction

When I first began writing this essay, I thought I would have to work hard to make my case. But now, as example after example of the national stupidity confronts us in the daily newspaper and TV news reports, the case is being made for me. I say this with no self-satisfaction, because it means that the growing number of people who believe that the nation is on a permanent descent into second- or third- or even lower-class status are probably right.

Our Ignorance About Science

I begin with this subject first because I think it is the most important, fully realizing that a large proportion of the U.S. population, not to mention of the academy, believes otherwise.

According to a 2001 Gallup poll about 45% of Americans believe “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.” Another 37% believe that “Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process.” Only 14% believe that “human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process.” — *Wikipedia*, Feb. 17, 2008

“One out of five Americans...remain convinced that the sun revolves around the earth.” — Weissmann, Gerald, *Galileo's Gout: Science In An Age of Endarkenment*, Bellevue Literary Press, N.Y., 2007, p. 18

“More than two thirds of Americans, according to surveys conducted for the National Science Foundation over the past two decades, are unable to identify DNA as the key to heredity. Nine out of ten Americans do not understand radiation and what it can do to the body.” — Jacoby, Susan, *The Age of American Unreason*, Pantheon Books, N.Y., 2008, p. xvii.

“American adults in general do not understand what molecules are (other than that they are really small).” — Jon D. Miller, political scientist who directs the Center for Biomedical Communications at the Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago

“Only 27 percent of college graduates believe that living beings have always existed in their present form — although that in itself is an astonishingly high figure — but 42 percent of Americans with only a partial college education and half of high school graduates adhere to the creationist viewpoint that organic life has remained unchanged through the ages.” — *ibid.*, p. 23.

According to a Harris Poll of 2009-2010:

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82% of Americans believe in God;
76% believe in miracles;
75% believe in Heaven;
73% believe that Jesus is God or the Son of God;
72% believe in angels;
71% believe the soul survives after death;
70% believe in the Resurrection of Jesus;
61% believe in the virgin birth of Jesus;
61% believe in Hell;
60% believe in the Devil

Other polls have revealed that:

35% believe the Bible is literally true;
50% believe God created man;

The Stupidity of Millions of Americans About Global Warming

Despite the overwhelming evidence, there are millions of Americans who believe that global warming does not exist.

“The truth of it is that the global warming hoax has turned out to be just that ... one of the biggest hoaxes of the century. The temperatures are *not* going up. They are, in fact, going down. The polar ices are *not* melting ... they are moving ... the Antarctica [sic] ices are larger & the Arctic [sic] ices are smaller. All junk history to prove the so called warming have [sic] now been proven to be lies and falsified data. People are running for cover to protect their [sic] butts. CO₂ is not a problem. The earth is pretty much stronger than we insignificant people and well able to heal itself.”

The writer of these words is white, middle-class, and worked for several years as a bank vice-president. She is staunchly Republican. There are millions of Americans who share similar views, which is probably inevitable, since a common defense mechanism of those who lack the intelligence to deal with complex, potentially-overwhelming problems, is to deny they exist.

“The proportion [of Americans] who believe there is ‘solid evidence’ that the earth is warming fell from 71% in 2008 to 57% [in 2009]. Among Republicans, disbelief is the norm: only 35% think there is solid evidence of warming, according to a Pew poll.”¹

Our Ignorance About Politics and History

In 2000, against the will of the American people, the Supreme Court put an imbecile into the highest office in the land. Among the public utterances of this man were the following:

“The vast majority of our imports come from outside the country.”

“If we don’t succeed, we run the risk of failure.”

1. Lexington: “A refreshing dose of honesty”, in *The Economist*, Feb. 6th-12th, 2010, p. 38.

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“Republicans understand the importance of bondage between a mother and child.”

“No senior citizen should ever have to choose between prescription drugs and medicine.”

“I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy — but that could change.”

“One word sums up probably the responsibility of any Governor, and that one word is ‘to be prepared’.”

“Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate things.”

“I have made good judgments in the past. I have made good judgments in the future.”

“The future will be better tomorrow.”

“We’re going to have the best educated American people in the world.”

“One of the great things about books is sometimes there are some fantastic pictures.” [during an education photo-op]

“Illegitimacy is something we should talk about in terms of not having it.”

“We are ready for any unforeseen event that may or may not occur.”

“It isn’t pollution that’s harming the environment. It’s the impurities in our air and water that are doing it.”

“I stand by all the misstatements that I’ve made.”

In 2004 the people had a chance to correct the Court’s arrogance, but it didn’t, and gave George W. Bush four more years of what turned out to be the worst administration in the nation’s history. In September, 2008, polls indicated that it was entirely possible that a majority of American voters would choose for President a Republican who would continue many of the most destructive of Bush’s policies.

In 2008, John McCain, the Republican Presidential candidate, a politician who had spent five years in a Vietnamese prison (which is not a qualification for being President), who had a reputation for being a maverick when it was safe to do so and who had a record of somehow never showing up whenever the Senate voted on important environmental bills — this aging hack chose for his running mate an Alaskan red-neck woman who didn’t believe in global warming, who was a lifetime member of the NRA, who had worked tirelessly to allow indiscriminate hunting of wildlife in Alaska, who was for drilling in the National Wildlife Refuge, who had been involved in several scandals while she was governor of Alaska, and whose command of English is exemplified by the following:

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“My concern has been the atrocities there in Darfur and the relevance to me with that issue as we spoke about Africa and some of the countries there that were kind of the people succumbing to the dictators and the corruption of some collapsed governments on the continent, the relevance was Alaska’s investment in Darfur with some of our permanent fund dollars.”¹

And, she concluded, “never, ever did I talk about, well, gee, is it a country or a continent, I just don’t know about this issue.”

In an interview with cable TV host Bill O’Reilly, she said:

“And I think more of a concern has been not within the campaign the mistakes that were made, not being able to react to the circumstances that those mistakes created in a real positive and professional and helpful way for John McCain.”²

If McCain had become President, this all-American know-nothing would have been a heart-beat away from leadership of what was still the most powerful country in the world (though it was fading fast).

Yet she remained very much in the public eye, and the publication of her book, *Going Rogue*, in November, 2009, was greeted with long lines at book stores. It is fair to say that millions of Americans felt that this ignorant, stupid woman should be our next President. For a few intelligent observers, that fact alone is a sure sign that we are at the beginning of the end of American power and influence in the world.

The question I put to every voter who believes that Palin should hold national public office is this: Would you allow yourself or a loved one to be operated on by a surgeon who knew as little about the human body as Sarah Palin knows about this nation and the world?

If it is true that “how a politician campaigns tells you a lot about how he or she would govern”³, then Obama proved himself far ahead of both Hillary Clinton and John McCain in the smooth, competent way he ran his campaign, and far ahead of McCain in his judgement of people, he having chosen the competent, experienced, intelligent Sen. Joe Biden as his running mate.

In the midst of the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the nation’s voters elected Obama. Nevertheless, 57 million people — 46% of those voting — voted for McCain. In other words, that many Americans had not learned anything from the disastrous eight years of the Bush administration.

Five percent of the nation’s population owns more than half of all wealth. Twenty percent owns more than 80 percent of all wealth. Yet the number of registered voters is greater than 20 percent of the population, so the American people have it within their power to defy the political wishes of the wealthy few. Yet each election, the red-neck, fundamentalist masses are all too

1. Quoted in a *New York Times* column, 11/14/08, by Dick Cavett from a collection of Palin quotes collected by Maureen Dowd

2. Quoted by Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times*, Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009, p. WK 11.

3. Krugman, Pual, “Blizzard of Lies”, *The New York Times*, Sept. 12, 2008, p. A23

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eager to vote for their oppressors — the candidates who will implement the policies of the wealthy few that will only increase the financial hardships of the non-thinking many.

In the 2008 Presidential election campaign, Barak Obama was often accused, by the Republicans, of being “elitist”, which was particularly satisfying to the uneducated, religious voters who who didn’t even have the brains or knowledge of history to know that the Founding Fathers were nothing if not elitist.

“Surveys conducted by the National Constitution Center show that while Americans hold the Constitution in high esteem, they know relatively little about the nation’s founding document. Asked whether they could recall any of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, a majority could name only freedom of speech. After that, only four in ten could name freedom of religion and one in three freedom of the press. More than a third were unable to list any First Amendment rights; 42 percent think that the Constitution explicitly states that “the first language of the United States is English”; and 25 percent believe that Christianity was established by the Constitution as the official government religion. The young are even more ignorant than their parents and grandparents. About half of adults — but just 41 percent of teenagers — can name the three branches of government. Only four in ten adults — but just two in ten teenagers — know that there are one hundred U. S. Senators. The vast majority of adults and teens have no idea of when or by whom the Constitution was written. Among the teenagers, nearly 98 percent cannot name the Chief Justice of the United States.” — *ibid.*, pp. 299-300.

“More than half of adults do not even know that there are nine Supreme Court justices..” — *ibid.*, 299

“Ilya Somin, a George Mason University Law School professor, writes that ignorance of even the most basic political facts is so widespread that ‘voters not only cannot choose between specific competing policy programs, but also cannot accurately assign credit and blame for highly visible policy outcomes to the right office-holders.’ Studies support this view... — Harrop, Froma, “Ignorance and the American Voter”, www.realclearpolitics.com

“Somin writes that ‘voter ignorance poses a serious danger to American democracy,’ and there is ‘overwhelming evidence that the American electorate fails to meet even minimal criteria for adequate voter knowledge.’ He concludes that ‘close to one-third of Americans can be categorized as “know-nothings” almost completely ignorant of relevant political information.’” — www.law.gmu.edu/currnews/voter-knowledge.html

On 9/11, 2001, “walking home to her Upper East Side apartment, ... overwhelmed and confused, [Susan Jacoby] stopped at a bar. As she sipped her bloody mary, she quietly listened to two men, neatly dressed in suits. For a second she thought they were going to compare that day’s horrifying attack to the Japanese bombing in 1941 that blew America into World War II:

“‘This is just like Pearl Harbor,’ one of the men said.

The other asked, ‘What is Pearl Harbor?’

‘That was when the Vietnamese dropped bombs in a harbor and it started the Vietnam War.,’ the first man replied.”

“At that moment, Ms. Jacoby said, ‘I decided to write this book [*The Age of American Unreason*].” — *The New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2008, p. B9

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“[Susan Jacoby, author of *The Age of American Unreason*] pointed to a 2006 National Geographic poll that found nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds don’t think it is necessary or important to know where countries in the news are located. So more than three years into the Iraq war, only 23 percent of those with some college could locate Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel on a map.” — *ibid.*

Profoundly worrying as the above facts are about the American electorate, what has convinced me that the country will never recover from the Recession/Depression that began in 2008 is the enormous popularity of Right-wing radio commentator Rush Limbaugh. His weekly audience in early 2009 was more than 15 million — many of them, I am sure, victims of the incompetence of the Bush administration and of policies which Limbaugh strongly supports. In other words, we have a significant portion of the American electorate too dumb even to know why they are unemployed and without a future, and all-too willing to get their political advice about extraordinarily complex problems from a loudmouth, know-nothing redneck.

Members of the Tea Party movement of 2009-10 demand reductions in government spending. But they have yet to publish a list of the reductions they believe could be made, along with arguments (supported, say, by Government Accounting Office data) that each of the reductions is realistic. If they advocate cutting Social Security and Medicaid, the next question that each member needs to answer is if any member of his or her family is currently receiving this aid, and, if so, if the family member has made it clear he or she wants the aid cut. Members decry the money spent on the 2009 stimulus package, loudly claiming that the way to recover from a severe recession is through reduced government spending. They thus announce to all those with even half a brain that (1) they have never read even the most superficial history of the Great Depression, and, in particular, read what happened when FDR took the advice of the fiscal hawks and curtailed the government spending that was slowly lifting the country out of its woes; and (2) they haven’t the vaguest idea of the ideas, much less the arguments behind them, of the greatest 20th century economist, namely, J. M. Keynes.

Members also somehow never get around to explaining why it is that the two periods during which the national debt sky-rocketed were the administrations of Reagan and George W. Bush, both staunch right-wing proponents of reduced government spending.

This rabble of all-American know-nothings also insists that Pres. Obama is “a Marxist”. The fact that none of these patriots has ever read so much as a competent summary of Marx’s ideas — one written, say, for the average (i.e., none-too-bright) high school student — doesn’t bother them a bit.

But I am in no way proposing that the Republican Party be done away with! America’s dumb-shits have a right to a political party of their own, just like everyone else. On the other hand, it really is time for bumper stickers like:

Republicans Out of the U.S.!
(Let them move to Louisiana and Alaska!)

It is becoming increasingly clear that the history of the 21st century will be summed up in a single phrase: the *Battle of the Dumb-shits*: Muslim fanatics vs. Republicans, because the driving force underlying both groups is the shame and panic that comes from realizing that they simply do not have the brains to succeed in the modern world.

Our Stupidity About How to Help Africa

A sure-fire way for an American to get a feel-good fix is to join the prevailing chorus of voices demanding more aid to Africa. The trouble is that the unquestioning assumption is that whatever saves lives is good, because, clearly, what Africa needs is a larger population of poverty-stricken, uneducated, uncivilized, and in many cases savage inhabitants. Never once is a voice raised demanding the start of a real solution to Africa's problems, which is the limiting of population to no more than what each local region and local prevailing survival skills can support. "No help without a change in behavior" would be a good slogan, though one that no international agency and certainly no mob in need of a feel-good fix, will ever use. But it gets to the heart of the matter. If tomorrow a cure for AIDS were discovered that eliminated AIDS from the African continent — in fact, if tomorrow a way were found to rid Africa of all disease — is there a thinking person who seriously imagines that the poverty and civil war and incompetent governments would start to disappear?

Our Financial Irresponsibility

"Undermining our natural strengths are a viral combination of a record national debt now approaching \$10 trillion; a federal budget deficit projected this year [2008] at \$492 billion, but likely closer to \$700 billion; a staggering foreign trade deficit; and exhausted savings accounts. The average American household is now buried under mortgage debt of \$84,911, car and tuition loans of \$14,414, home equity loans of \$10,062 and credit card debt of \$8,565 — in sum, outstanding debt totaling \$117,952. According to other Federal Reserve statistics, average household savings this year are a mere \$392." — *AARP Bulletin*, Sept. 2008, p. 3.

I quote from the chapter of this book, "Politics and Economics":

"It must be said again and again, although I fully realize that this is way beyond the dim comprehension of the average American: credit card companies each month grant you up to a one-month loan interest-free, within some stated maximum amount. Furthermore, they provide a certain protection in that you can refuse to pay for fraudulent charges. *But that's all!* The companies are *not* obligated to allow you to live beyond your means. If you insist on doing so, they are *not* obligated to charge interest rates that you can afford. If you don't like their interest rates, then pay your debt and start living within your means."

The fact that the credit card companies are a pack of heartless scoundrels does not alter the validity of this.

Similarly, it may be that the sub-prime mortgage crisis was the result of the practices of unscrupulous mortgage lenders, but these lenders did not *force* their victims to buy mortgages they couldn't afford. At least 50% of the blame rests with the ignorant graduates of (and dropouts

from) the public schools who couldn't be bothered with reading up on what is involved in responsibly buying a mortgage (that would have taken away from sports time on TV, and would have been elitist and intellectual). When a large proportion of the population is just plain stupid, we all pay a price.

In passing, I should also mention that spam would disappear *in a matter of weeks* if every computer user observed one simple rule: never, ever open a spam email. Period.

Our Stupidity About Recycling and Alternative Energy

If you are inclined to believe that Americans are at least able to think and act intelligently when it comes to recycling, go to your supermarket and find out what percentage of toilet paper is made from recycled paper. You will be lucky to find just one brand. In most supermarkets, you will find none. And yet this has to be one of the easiest ways to save numerous trees each year. I can assure the reader from experience that there is no noticeable difference between toilet paper made from recycled paper, and toilet paper made from newly cut-down trees.

“Americans like their toilet tissue soft: exotic confections that are silken, thick and hot-air-fluffed...

“But fluffiness comes at a price: millions of trees harvested in North America and in Latin American countries, including some percentage of trees from rare old-growth forests in Canada. Although toilet tissue can be made at similar cost from recycled material, it is the fiber taken from standing trees that help give it that plush feel, and most large manufacturers rely on them.

Customers ‘demand soft and comfortable,’ said James Malone, a spokesman for Georgia Pacific, the maker of Quilted Northern. ‘Recycled fiber cannot do it.’” — Kaufman, Leslie, “What Mr. Whipple Didn't Say: Fluffy Paper is Costly to Forests”, *The New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2009, p. 1.

Next, consider the national attitude on alternative energy sources. As soon as the price of gasoline dropped in October, 2008, the interest in developing alternative energy sources started to fade. It is hard to imagine a people so stupid that they cannot think beyond the price of gas at the pump. “There, Margaret, I told you so. There's no energy crisis. We have plenty of oil. No need to develop those other resources.” And when the next rise in gas prices occurs, it will be, “Damn, Margaret, we're running out of oil. Guess we'll have to start thinking about alternative energy resources.”

“...I could only cringe when reading this article from CNNMoney.com on Dec. 22 [2008]: ‘After nearly a year of flagging sales, low gas prices and fat incentives are reigniting America's taste for big vehicles. Trucks and S.U.V.'s will outsell cars in December...something that hasn't happened since February. Meanwhile, the forecast finds that sales of hybrid vehicles are expected to be way down.’” — Friedman, Tom, “Win, Win, Win, Win, Win ...”, column in *The New York Times*, “Week in Review”, Sunday, Dec. 28, 2008, p. 8.

“The Wall Street Journal had an article last week reporting that, now that gas prices have gone back down, almost half a million fuel-frugal small cars are piling up unsold at dealers around the

country.” — Dowd, Maureen, “No More Hummer Nation”, column in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, April 1, 2009, p. A31.

Our Stupidity About Lowering Gas Consumption

In mid-2008, the price of oil was at \$145 a barrel and the price of gas was above \$4 a gallon. In Feb., 2009, as a result of the economic downturn, the price of oil was around \$35 a barrel and the price of gas was around \$2 a gallon — a drop of 75% in oil price and 50% in gas price. And yet during this period, gas *consumption* in the U.S. had dropped only around 6%!

During the peak of gas prices, occasionally a news program would feature an expert who would explain that gas consumption can be reduced by driving at or below the speed limit, by driving as slowly as safety allows in cities and residential areas, by coasting to a stop at red lights and stop signs, and by avoiding sharp accelerations — a style of driving that might be called Slow-and-Smooth¹.

You would think that the nation’s drivers would have taken to heart such a simple way to reduce their gas costs. But the sad truth is that, with gas above \$4 a gallon, if you drove at the speed limit on the nation’s highways, you were passed by almost every other car on the road. In cities, if you coasted to a red light or a stop sign, you were often greeted by the raised fist of the all-American dumb-shit in the car behind you. And, needless to say, he or she then accelerated rapidly when the light changed.

Studies have indicated that as much as a 35% *reduction in gas consumption* could be realized by Slow-and-Smooth driving². Assume, conservatively, that “only” a 20% reduction were possible nationwide. Consider what such a reduction would do to the price of oil and, as a result, to the amount of money going to terrorists in some of the oil-producing countries. Furthermore, this reduction could be accomplished without the auto companies having to spend a penny on improving gas mileage or on developing new types of vehicles.

But even with such facts as I have cited above staring the American motorist in the face, he and she have been too dumb to make the slightest change in driving habits, other than the idiot-obvious one of not driving when there was no money at all for gas due to unemployment.

Our Stupidity About Guns

“...more than 12,000 people are murdered with guns annually [in the U.S.]...”³

This means that, as of 2009, *each year* Americans are killing *three times* the number of Americans as the *total* number killed in the entire six years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan! Americans far outperform Al Qaeda’s best fighters when it comes to killing Americans.

It is often said, rightly, that the National Rifle Association (NRA) is a notorious promoter of the unlimited sale of guns, including semi-automatic weapons. But we must remember that the NRA is powerful because of the vast number of Americans who support it and the policies it advocates. Perhaps a case can be made that the strictly controlled use of handguns, rifles and shotguns, excluding all automatic and semi-automatic weapons, is legitimate. But what we have

1. Cheap dashboard-mounted accelerometers could be sold that had a light that was green when acceleration was less than a pre-set maximum, and red when acceleration was greater.

2. Valdes-Dapena, Peter, “Take it slow and save big on gas”, May 9, 2006, CNNMoney.com

3. Herbert, Bob, column, “A Culture Soaked in Blood”, *The New York Times*, Apr. 25, 2009

now, in 2009, is the kind of idiocy that is only possible when America's good ol' boys have far too much power.

The Stupidity of the American Consumer

Whenever I feel a flicker of hope about the prospects of the American people, I remind myself that this is a people who might or might not buy a car for \$20,000, but who will be far more inclined to buy the car if they are told it costs \$23,000 but that, because they bought it now, they will receive a \$3,000 rebate. There is no hope, none, for a people that stupid.

What Made America Great in the Past?

A reader at this point might well ask how such a nation became a world power, in particular a world economic power. There are three answers. First, Americans are born consumers, eager and willing to buy whatever products the corporations place before them, regardless whether the products serve any important purpose or not. (About two-thirds of the GDP is due to consumer spending.) The trait that accounts for Americans' hopeless inability to make intelligent choices as voters, is precisely the trait that makes them such avid consumers, namely, their unquestioning belief in what advertisers tell them.

Second, Americans work hard (when jobs are available).

Third, America is still probably the best country in the world for ambitious, intelligent, creative people (who, unfortunately, make up only a tiny minority of the population). It is still probably the best country in the world in which to start a business. But, unfortunately, as we are learning every day (winter 2008-9), that is not enough to keep the country strong.