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The Age of Stupidity: From Johnson and Biden to Putin and Xi Jinping



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

The role of stupidity in determining the course of history is often underestimated by historians. They neglect it as too crude and shallow a factor to be the cause of crucial events, preferring to unearth more sophisticated and intellectually respectable explanations. Calling a leader “a fool” may be pervasive as abuse, but is seldom accepted as the underlying reason for a calamitous decision.

This is surely a mistake. “Never lose your sense of the superficial,” said the newspaper publisher Lord Northcliffe and his advice applies as much to historic trends as it does to

daily news. Yet pundits like to feel that they are digging deeper than a personal failing, and seldom focus on plain and simple stupidity as the reason why leaders make unforced errors.

This kind of individual inadequacy is not equally present in all periods and it may be that in some eras the scope for chronic blunderers to do damage is higher than in others. It was certainly high in 1914, for instance, when dim-witted leaders such as Kaiser Wilhelm 11 in Germany, Tsar Nicholas 11 in Russia and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy were making the decisive moves leading to a European war that more intelligent leaders might have avoided as being much against their interests and putting at risk the future of their regimes. We may now have entered a similar period when powerful political leaders are more foolish and incapable of coping with crises than their predecessors. Looking at just the events of the last 12 months, I have drawn up a league table of actions by four national leaders which suggests that they are a bigger fool than anybody had imagined.

The most disastrous decision in Russian history

Vladimir Putin inevitably comes first because on 24 February he took the disastrous decision to invade Ukraine, having convinced himself that a Russian army of inadequate size would easily topple the government in Kyiv and the Ukrainian army would meekly surrender.

Experts explain this piece of idiocy by pointing to Putin's isolation in the Kremlin, reliance on ill-informed advisors who were really servile courtiers, and a genuine fear that the moment was passing when Russia could stop Ukraine moving into the orbit of the Nato countries.

After spending 22 years in power, the Russian leader suffered from arrogance and over-confidence in his own judgement, but a more intelligent man might not have lost his grip on reality and taken what will probably be remembered as the most disastrous decision in Russian history.

Biden's lack of foresight

Joe Biden's foolishness is of a different kind and mostly centres on his making vague and over-optimistic promises to produce results that he cannot deliver. He gives the impression that the White House can solve problems that are at least partly outside its control, such as the calamitous American withdrawal from Afghanistan, though this was largely the consequence of Donald Trump's deal with the Taliban in 2020 to withdraw US support from the Kabul Government. It was the US military who mishandled the details of the

retreat, but it was Biden who took the blame because he had not foreseen the rout that was likely to happen on the ground in front of the television cameras.

This habit of over-promising and under-performing is equally true of Biden's domestic agenda, giving American voters an impression of feebleness and ineffectuality. In the Ukraine war, there is a strange indecisiveness about whether Biden wants the war to end with the successful defence of Ukraine or the total defeat of Russia. On top of this there is an inability to calculate how far economic sanctions against Russia will shape the US politics. Thus the administration was this week scrabbling to prevent the Europeans stopping the insurance of tankers carrying Russian crude, a measure that will provoke a rise in the price of oil and further doom Democratic Party hopes of holding either House of Congress in the midterm elections.

Xi Jinping became a victim of his own success

China succeeded in suppressing the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic with well organised lockdowns, but then failed to use the time gained to vaccinate the population. Repeated lockdowns are now squeezing the economy and reducing growth without bringing an end to the pandemic any nearer.

As with Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the weakness of lockdowns compared to mass vaccination as a means of controlling the Covid-19 virus should have been obvious to Xi Jinping, but he became the victim of his government's initial success in combatting the pandemic which Beijing is trying to repeat in different circumstances.

As for Britain, commentators slide away from describing Boris Johnson as a nincompoop, instead praising or denouncing his political skills in surviving the shambolic consequences of his years in office. In reality, all the nationalist leaders in the world, from Trump to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have stuck like limpets to their office by fair means or foul.

The foolishness of slogans replacing policies

But at the heart of the Johnson years in Downing Street there is a profound foolishness with slogans replacing policies, contempt for legality and a shambolic approach to government. Targeting the Northern Ireland protocol and sending asylum seekers to Rwanda are aimed at recreating the old pro-Brexit coalition in which English nationalism combines with anti-immigrant feeling.

This is a government that feeds off crises of its own making which it hopes will divert attention from its latest scandal and failure. Raw gobbets of nostalgia are served up to stimulate memories of supposedly better times, but over-all there is a lack of seriousness exemplified by Johnson himself and his cabinet of mediocrities, opportunists and fanatics. Some may say that those who are pilloried as stupid are simply acting in their own selfish interests, but this is demonstrably not true of Putin, Biden and Xi Jinping. A more convincing argument is that the perception that leaders today are of lower quality is a mirage; their predecessors were just as bad, but could conceal their incompetence because they did not have to take such weighty decisions.

It may also be that we live in a period, like that before the First World War, when leaders commonly beat the nationalist drum and foolishly welcome unwinnable conflict at home and abroad as a way of securing their own grip on power.

But one should not lose sight of the simple notion that there are a lot of stupid leaders in the world who are all the more dangerous because they cannot make a sensible decision, even in their own interests. This was true of Saddam Hussein – in some ways an intelligent thug and in others a complete idiot – who launched wars against Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990 that any child shining shoes in the streets of central Baghdad could have told him would bring disaster and kill millions. As a German politician remarked of an earlier conflict, it is “difficult to know where the stupidity ends and the crime begins.”

Further thoughts

I have always been interested in pure stupidity in history, believing it to be a quality that intelligent people shy away from and underrate, often thinking that this is too crass and simple-minded an explanation for turning points in history. But great events do not necessarily have profound causes.

I think I first got the idea from my father Claud Cockburn who made this point about the dangerous stupidity of the Nazis about whom he knew a lot, having fled Berlin a day before Hitler became German Chancellor on 30 January 1933.

He moved to London where he started up an anti-fascist newsletter called *The Week* six weeks later. This little publication flourished and in time Claud came to be regarded as the centre of all anti-Nazi intrigue in London by the German ambassador Joachim von Ribbentrop who became Hitler’s Foreign Minister in 1938.

Claud wrote that “the fact that he thought so [that Claud was the centre of anti-Nazi opposition]– that he could be such a fool as to think so – helped to give me a measure of the Third Reich which could employ such an ambassador [...] What was terrifying about

this man was that he was a damn fool – and could only have been employed by a regime of basically damn fools, who could blow up half the world out of sheer stupidity.”

Not that Claud needed further evidence about the evils of the Nazis, which he had witnessed first hand in Germany. As for their ambassador in London, he wrote that “a satisfactory thing about Herr von Ribbentrop was that you did not have to waste time wondering whether there was some latent streak of good in him somewhere. He was all of a piece – and silly into the bargain.”

Beneath the Radar

The degree of racial division in the US never ceases to amaze and depress me. The politics of crime is inextricably intertwined with the politics of race and they toxify each other. News reporting on mass killings and gun ownership often underplays or misunderstands this but note this particularly grisly incident.

Cockburn's Picks

This is a fascinating piece by Ryan Grim in *the Intercept* about how progressive groups in the US crippled their own effectiveness by internal strife at the very moment when their causes are under attack from the advocates of regressive legislation. This self-destructive trend has spread to Europe and has done much to discredit progressive organisations and publications

Patrick Cockburn is the author of War in the Age of Trump (Verso).

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