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The Age of Stupidity is Upon Us

By Andrew Levine
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What if when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked, the United States had had leaders like the ones that built the post-World War II world order?

Those guys weren't angels: they got the Cold War going, and they set the American empire on its global course. But they weren't stupid.

Even at a time when, unlike now, the American economy was unrivaled and booming and the rest of the world was in shambles, they had the good sense not to overreach. They were aware of the limits of American power.

If we had had leaders of that caliber in 2001, would they have stoked up the spirit of revenge after 9/11 in order to reshape the Greater Middle East, a part of the world that they barely understood? Would they have started never-ending wars that create the conditions for more never-ending wars?

And would they have used the fear of terrorism to undermine the Bill of Rights – all but the Second Amendment, as construed by rightwing Supreme Court justices? It is thanks to them that Americans live in an insane gun culture that has led to the deaths of many more Americans than the Islamic State and Al Qaeda and all of their spin-offs and equivalents combined.

Or would they have the good sense to call the attacks on New York and Washington what they were — crimes, not acts of war – and responded to them accordingly?

That might have been enough to keep many of the more conspicuous disorders currently afflicting the world at bay. Thanks to geopolitical considerations and the exigencies of the oil economy, the United States, back then, did have some leverage over the Taliban — and Al Qaida was in Afghanistan only because the Taliban let them be.

Perhaps, by making the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, and his close associates an offer they could not refuse, the U.S. could have gotten Kabul to disband or expel Al Qaida and to turn Bin Laden over. At that point too, the U.S. could have prevailed upon the Pakistani army and intelligence services for clear and unequivocal support.

But thanks to arrogance and ignorance, and a conspicuous lack of good sense, they chose a different path. The U.S. is on that path still. Indeed, on President Obama's watch, U.S. policy has actually gotten stupider, Obama's cautiousness and irresolution notwithstanding.

This is what comes when you cede power to necons and humanitarian interveners and empower Hillary Clinton; and when you are too weak to keep Republicans in Congress and a few war-mongering Democrats from sticking their noses into the morass as well.

Even so, as Obama prepared to run for a second term, it seemed as if the wars that George Bush and Dick Cheney had started, in Afghanistan and Iraq, were ending — that they were winding down, inconclusively but definitively.

Also, by then, the War Party seemed to have tired of the Middle East. Where is the glory, after all, in fighting against roadside bombs, alongside "allies" that hate you and play you for all you are worth? They were eager to pivot towards Asia – to put China down a notch – and to revive the Cold War with Russia.

This wasn't smart; indeed, it was criminally reckless. But hardly anyone in a position to be heard called them on this. No surprise there: stupidity is a slippery slope, and the stewards of the empire have been stupid for decades. Provoking China and Russia is just par for the course.

By now, it is taken for granted that a perpetual war regime like the one we now live under needs wars to fight, and that they can't all pass under the radar like Obama's quasi-secret wars in Yemen and in Africa. Every now and then, the military-industrial-national security state complex needs a war that excites the public and themselves. If none exist, it is necessary to create one. With servile media in tow, that is easy enough to do.

As for recklessly endangering life on the planet, our politicians seem to think that they can get away with it. So long as China and Russia remain in the hands of saner and wiser leaders than ours, they may be right.

Despite spending more on “defense” than the rest of the world’s combined, the United States is not particularly good at winning wars or even at concluding them definitively. This hardly bothers our politicians or the plutocrats they serve. Because wars are what make their world turn round, all that matters to them is that America remains second to none in starting wars and keeping them going.

The French had the good sense not only to stay out of the Iraq War, but also to make it clear to anyone who would listen what they thought of it. Their insubordination was intolerable to Washington.

French fries became “freedom fries” and mainstream media pointed out what a shiftless and feckless lot those French were; how they abhorred hard work and long hours, and cared only about carnal pleasures and vacations. Now they are with us again, and so, we are, again, best friends forever.

As recently as 2013, even the UK government, subservient as always to its American overlord, realized that it would not be able to get parliamentary approval for bombing Syria. Thanks to the realization that the Brits wouldn’t be there to cover his back — and, above all, thanks to clear-headed Russian diplomacy — Obama pulled back. And so, for almost two years, the United States was saved from doing something very stupid in Syria; something from which no good could possibly come.

Thus, a few years ago, the new old Europe had yet to drop off the deep edge; America really was “exceptional,” exceptionally stupid. By now, though, the rest of the West has caught up. The U.S. hasn’t gotten smarter, but it is no longer the outlier it used to be.

Everyone knows that British bombs in Syria will serve no useful military purpose; that their effect is mainly symbolic. And yet they bomb — putting the British people at greater risk.

This is stupid indeed, but David Cameron is downright sagacious compared to François Hollande. With the National Front breathing down his neck, Hollande has affected a stance as vengeful — and dumb — as Bush and Cheney’s after 9/11.

Perhaps it is more than just an affectation; Hollande’s declaration of “war” on the Islamic State — or is it, like Bush and Cheney’s, on “terror” generally? — at least seems more heartfelt than theirs. Could he actually be stupid enough to believe that the IS can be beaten back with bombs and “boots on the ground?”

Bush and Cheney understood that, for the United States to have any chance at all of “winning” its wars the old fashioned way, the boots on the ground had to be American. Times change, however. In the West today, putting one’s own economic conscripts in harm’s way is out of the

question; actual fighting is for “special ops” assassins and mercenaries and, of course, where available for biddable proxies.

Too bad for Hollande – and Obama and Cameron – that good proxies are hard to find in a region where there are so many players, and so many different, often conflicting, agendas. Are they even aware of the futility?

The Bush-Obama War on Terror was bound to come to this. Even Obama understands; he told the nation so, from the Oval Office, last Sunday night.

But he can’t stop himself – and not just because Republicans won’t let him. His advisors won’t let him either; and the inertial force of their out-of-control stupidity is hard to overcome. Only a real leader could do that.

Meanwhile, like his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, Hollande has placed himself out in front, forcing Obama’s hand, leaving the hegemon to lead “from behind.” Obama might as well say, as Benjamin Disraeli did in Queen Victoria’s day, that: “I am their leader, therefore, I must follow.”

And so, like his junior partners, Cameron and Hollande, Obama is playing into the IS’s hands, doing precisely what they want him to do.

Other European countries, even Germany, want in too. The refugee crisis is partly to blame; so are relations with Turkey, a member of NATO and perhaps some day of the EU as well.

Turkey’s connections to the IS are complicated, to say the least. They are against them, and on their side, all at the same time – partly thanks to Saudi machinations, but mainly because the Turkish government fears its own Kurdish population more than it fears the IS. The Kurds are the only generally reliable proxy fighters in the West’s arsenal.

It is all so manifestly self-defeating that it is hard to believe that, even with stupidity riding herd over Western governments, it still can happen.

Were they just a little bit smarter, Western governments would realize that all that can come of militarizing the struggle against the IS is misery: to others, and to their own countries.

The Russians understand this; they are at least trying to make the best of a bad situation. Our leaders still don’t get it.

How stupid is that!

For some three or four decades after World War II, there were political scientists and public intellectuals – in the United States and in those European countries that are now tempted or willing to join the Bush-Obama War on Terror – who viewed the American political party system admiringly.

The idea was that, in contrast to the American case, European political parties were too “ideological.” This, supposedly, was holding Europe back.

“Ideological” didn’t quite mean what the word suggests — focused on comprehensive systems of doctrines or ideas. On this view, the real problem was that European political parties were too focused on the interests of the social classes they represented.

Parties that represented workers or trade unions bore the brunt of this criticism, though it obviously also applied to parties that promoted the interests of capitalists and other privileged social strata.

The idea seems to have been that class-based politics was fine in the pre-World War I era, and still OK in the tumultuous inter-war years, but that it had become anachronistic in the post-World War II period.

The United States, on the other hand, had two semi-established “catch-all” parties that cared little for social visions or ideas of any kind, and that had no real organizational ties to class-based institutions.

Democrats and Republicans did draw on different, sometimes non-overlapping, constituencies for votes. But the connections were – and still are — informal, at best.

Catchall parties exist to get candidates elected, and to get people to fill government positions. They compete, but in the way that sports teams do — for prizes and rewards.

And, like sports teams, they have loyal followers. This is why electoral propaganda in the United States is directed mainly at the ten percent or so of voters who call themselves “undecided”; everyone else votes for the home team, if they vote at all.

On the surface, the differences between Democrats and Republicans seem pronounced, but their basic values, ideas, and aspirations are essentially the same.

Why this was thought to be better than the European model was never clear. Among other things, it makes elections turn more on the personalities of candidates than would be the case if voters were persuaded mainly by party platforms, which, as it happens, hardly anyone in the United States even bothers to look at. Perhaps this is a good thing, but it is far from obvious why.

Before the American electorate became as polarized and segmented by region and race as it now is, the Democratic Party was a paradigm case of a catchall party. It still approximates the ideal type. What holds its parts together are traditions and cultural affinities. Even in the most expansive sense of the term, ideology plays no role.

The Republican Party is different. Its membership falls into two broad cultural categories: Country Club Republicans and raving yahoos. There are many more of the latter than the former; though, until now, the former have been able to call the shots, at least at the national level.

Now, though, with the help of Donald Trump and a field of similarly noxious rival candidates, and with Tea Partiers and their ilk beyond anyone's control, the Party's cultural contradictions may finally be doing the party of Lincoln in.

This is why the GOP nowadays is no longer a model catchall party even to the extent that Democrats still are. It is more of a retrograde hodgepodge.

Even so, there are Republican politicians – and also pseudo-intellectuals ensconced in think tanks funded by rightwing plutocrats, and in the dark quarters of second-rate universities — who do promote an ideology of sorts.

At the risk of demeaning some important eighteenth and nineteenth century Dutch, British, French and American thinkers, call it “classical liberalism.” Or, at the further risk of demeaning a few intellectually serious, politically befuddled, academics, call it “libertarianism.”

Since the vast majority of Republican voters could care less about brainy jibber-jabber, classical liberals get to represent the party line. The underlying reality is mindless, inchoate rage, barely reconstructed racism, and boastful ignorance. But, when occasions warrant, Republicans do have a serviceable ideology that they wheel out as an adornment.

Classical liberalism is not the only game in town; but its proponents are the only ones interested in imposing a semblance of order on the otherwise inchoate confusion swelling up from the party's base.

However, there are also Republicans drawn to traditional authoritarian strains of conservative political thought; and the GOP is home to evangelical Christian theocrats and, lately, to reactionary Zionists who care mainly that the United States do all that it can to advance the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, and to maintain the ethnocratic order that Israel's Jewish population has established there.

However, when it comes to proclaiming a Republican ideology, only the classical liberals rise to the occasion. And so, we are told, the GOP is the party of small government and free enterprise.

This, with apologies to Jeremy Bentham, a thinker whose views fall within the true classical liberal ambit, is “nonsense on stilts.”

The GOP prides itself on being second to none in supporting – and funding – the military and the police (except when police chiefs plead for less insane gun laws). And, in their view, the more Big Brother keeps close watch on everything that moves, the better. Small government indeed!

What the GOP's “classical liberals” want is not the minimal state of classical liberal theory, but a state that intrudes minimally on the power and privileges of the increasingly tiny fraction of the population that owns nearly everything there is to own.

This is all that their talk of “free enterprise” amounts to; capitalists using the state to enrich themselves under the cover of a beneficent “invisible hand.”

Thus there is a Republican ideology, after all. It is a secular, free market theology, built upon doctrines still taught in elementary Economics classes, based on models that everybody always knew never applied to the real world, except, at best, very approximately; and on theories that rest on assumptions that were superseded decades ago.

It is tempting to say that it is all a subterfuge; that the Republican ideology is nothing more than window-dressing for unabashed class warfare.

That it is, of course; and with a degree of brazenness that even Democrats cannot abide. But today's GOP is more than just a tool of the most avaricious capitalists. It is also Ground Zero for the stupidity of the age.

This electoral season looked, at first, as if it would be a replay of the past several electoral cycles: with GOP candidates for President distinguishing themselves mainly by their degree of ludicrousness. Democratic Party cheerleaders were chomping at the bit – eager to make fun of Republicans and to let them make fun of themselves. It would be 2008 and 2012 all over again.

As it turned out, this time is different. For one thing, Republican stupidity is no longer just a matter of C- students growing old gracefully — flaunting their dimwittedness and ignorance. Hard as it is to believe, Ben Carson and Ted Cruz were A students at respectable institutions; and look at them now! George W. Bush is a raving genius in comparison.

Donald Trump is no moron either; he just plays one on TV. He spouts vile nonsense, but even his most ardent detractors concede that he is one clever dude – diabolical, calculating and shrewd.

Does he promote stupidity only to win over the dumbest and the vilest voters, the Republican base? That would be the most likely explanation. He seems to have figured out what they want to hear, and he is feeding it to them by the carload.

Under his aegis – and to a lesser extent under Cruz's and Marco Rubio's and Jeb Bush's – stupidity and vileness have fused.

The stupid have always been with us, but Trump and the others have raised the level of vileness to an extreme unknown in American elections in modern times. Whenever Trump's lead in the polls is challenged, he ups the ante. The more malevolent his words become, the more his fans like it.

In Trump's world – unlike, say, Mitt Romney's or Joe Biden's – every word is calculated. And still, he proposed banning Muslims from entering the United States. This would include American citizens, traveling abroad and service members serving abroad.

It might seem that he didn't bother to think his plan through before he proclaimed it. What about the Muslims upon whom the American economy depends – the ones in league with America's oil barons, and the ones who buy the weapons systems that our death merchants produce?

And that is just the tip of the iceberg. In a global economy, even “clashing civilizations” are economically intertwined. One would think that a billionaire would be mindful of that; and that a card-carrying plutocrat would be more conscious of the interests of his class.

But Trump doesn’t care; not now. For him, winning is not the main thing, it is the *only* thing – and he has taken the measure of the benighted souls whose votes he seeks.

Or has he? Maybe his goal, at this point, is instead to self-destruct, the better to get back to wheeling and dealing and pleasure seeking.

Could it be, as some have suggested, that Trump has decided to become so outrageous that the GOP brass would have no choice but to condemn his campaign– either because he wants to be forced out of the race or because he wants to damage the Republican Party beyond repair?

The first of these conjectures is unlikely – not because Trump may not be having as much fun campaigning as he used to, or because he fears that the way his campaign is going, he might actually win – but because, as an egomaniac, he wouldn’t want to lose, or appear to lose, on any terms but his own.

It is more likely that he wants to split the party by setting up an independent campaign organized around a cult of (his) personality. If he really does end up putting the GOP down; then more power to him. A world without the Republican Party would be a better world indeed.

But America is not Italy, and Trump is not Silvio Berlusconi. Does Trump realize this or does he care? There are more than a few parallels; and Trump is not one to shy away from competition. He might be thinking that Berlusconi created a party of his own, and what’s he got that the Donald doesn’t?

However, this too is likely not the case. Trump is savvy enough to realize that no candidate running outside America’s semi-established two party system has any chance at all of winning the Presidency, no matter how much money he has or how great a showman he may be.

But he is unscrupulous enough to try to turn the GOP into something like an American version of France’s *Front National*.

If, on that basis, he actually then went on to win – not just the nomination, but the presidency itself — he would have to decide what he wants power for. He is probably not too worried about that, however – not just because of his overweening self-confidence, but because he is smart enough to understand that the Republican Party, having become a party of troglodytes, is bound to lose in the election ahead.

There is another possibility, of course: that the man really is an idiot; that he isn’t just playing his marks for the fools that they are. I doubt it, but strange things do happen; just look at Ted Cruz.

All that we know for sure, at this point, is that whatever Trump is up to, he has mainstreamed fascist-like sentiments. Cruz and Rubio have contributed too, but not nearly to the same extent.

The f-word has been bandied about a lot in the past few weeks by mainstream Republicans, desperate to stop Trump, and by Democratic pundits keen on benefiting from the Republican establishment's distress.

Neither have much understanding of what "fascism" means to well-informed people, much less to competent historians and political theorists. But they are right about one thing: that Trump is appealing to the kinds of men and women in the kinds of ways that the bona fide fascists of the inter-war years did.

He isn't creating terrorists with drones and bombs the way that Obama, Cameron and Hollande are doing, but his *fascisant* antics are just as criminally reckless as their "humanitarian" interventions.

That what Trump – and Cruz and the others – are saying is stupid may therefore not be the worst thing about their campaigns. Time will tell. What is clear now is just that stupidity, unprecedented levels of it, is breaking out all over; and that the GOP is not just a symptom, but also an important cause.

One obvious bit of supporting evidence comes from Republicans in the House and Senate who are outdoing themselves trying to wreck efforts to stop global warming.

Even more dispositive evidence, also lately in the news, is provided by Jerry Falwell Junior, President of Liberty University, the pseudo-university his father founded. Falwell *files* is calling on the God fearing Christian students in his charge to carry concealed weapons on campus – in case Muslims attack.

Falwell would be well advised to change Liberty's motto: from "knowledge aflame" (whatever that means) to "the epitome of stupidity."

That would be a suitable motto for Republicans too, now that a cult of stupidity has them in its thrall. That — not small government or "free enterprise" — is the true reigning ideology of the GOP.

What Obama and his counterparts abroad have been doing is more consequential and dangerous; and it too is blatantly stupid. But, next to Trump *et. al.*, those "world leaders" seem almost smart in comparison.