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Political Stupidity

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For lack of effective, credible criticism in the slap-happy world of the media, power does indeed tend to corrupt (as Lord John Acton noted[1]) because stupidity is a corruption of learning. For some reason, the power to command frequently causes a failure to learn--with power being a substitute for wisdom. Worse yet, the errors of leaders are less likely to be corrected then those made followers lower on the power-ladder, so, as often noted, failure comes from the top down.

Ideally, the responsibility of those in power is to govern as reasonably as possible to the mutual advantage of all. To accomplish this end, a leader has best be well informed, heed available information, be open-minded without being empty-headed[2] and judge all effects of policies objectively. However, it is unusual for someone transfixed by his own power to be open-minded enough to perceive that a pet policy is having unintended, negative effects, responsible enough to admit it and wise enough to replace it with a better one.[3] The principle of cognitive dissonance applied to politics would show that there is a constant push from way below and outside the powergrid to reform the system and force those in power above to live up to the ideals they routinely espouse but rarely honor and apply. Usually, such pushes are blunted by mid-level, career-minded, promotion-seeking mismanagers.

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Ideally, the responsibility of those in power is to govern as reasonably as possible to the mutual advantage of all. To accomplish this end, a leader has best be well informed, heed available information, be open-minded without being empty-headed[2] and judge all effects of policies objectively. However, it is unusual for someone transfixed by his own power to be open-minded enough to perceive that a pet policy is having unintended, negative effects, responsible enough to admit it and wise enough to replace it with a better one.[3] The principle of cognitive dissonance applied to politics would show that there is a constant push from way below and outside the powergrid to reform the system and force those in power above to live up to the ideals they routinely espouse but rarely honor and apply. Usually, such pushes are blunted by mid-level, career-minded, promotion-seeking mismanagers.

Generally, mismanagement is promoted when creeds and rituals of government become so rigid as to inhibit adaptive responses. Reduced to essence, politics is a battle between the "Ins" and "Outs" over loaves and fishes[4]–a civil war by peaceful means, with reform coming from below and revolution induced when the power-system fails by being too rigid to adjust to necessity. In such holy wars of politics, priests crusade and campaign, thrive and perish,[5] but even when victorious over political opponents, officials may find their reforms and policies lost to bureaucratic inertia. It often appears that the machine of government is designed to produce friction, constructed to break down and operated for those who service it. Society is there for the government-not the other way around to feed it and clean up after it, to nurse it through illness and to support it when it goes out to cut its teeth on its equally corrupt, problematic neighbors.

The sad fact of political life is that misgovernment may strengthen a regime temporarily.[6] Gaining and retaining power is what government is all about, so *the "Ins" tend to make decisions which they perceive to be to their own short-term advantage albe them perhaps to the long-term detriment of all.* The idea that power is not an end in itself but a means to help people is a myth political priests use to mask their short-term, self-serving machinations from the long suffering public, or, as Spinoza almost said, authority is based on stupidity:[7] e.g., Congress as government by deadlock.[8] We have carried the Constitutional principle of "Checks and Balances" to the excess of gridlock[9] because officials lack theoretically possible if oxymoronic "Political virtue", which places the national good above individual gain of self-serving pols. This happened in the Gilded Age of the late 19th century and is happening again in the early 21st.[10]

When the government takes control of a society, it may be building itself up, but it also builds up a lot of aggravation and resentment. As agencies expand in size, productivity is reduced to the point that one might think waste has become an incentive. This is the point at which bureaucracies[a] cease to solve problems and become problems themselves. While there is nothing quite so stupid and aggravating in public life as officials perversely persistent in pursuing a policy clearly in everyone else's worst interest,[b] the commitment of politicians to their favorite projects is a motivating force unto itself and makes government immune to reason and restraint. The short-term gain of power through corruption makes a mismanaged agency less ruly and more an end in itself. This may make the "Ins" temporarily stronger, but it also intensifies long-term resentment against them on the part of the "Outs".

The craftier politicians have found that, while stupidity may lead to unpopularity, popularity may lead to stupidity and that this is the most effective way to succeed in politics. If a politician really wants to be stupid, as so many seem to, he need not be too circumspect-all he has to do is find a popular cause. The more popular the cause, the less critical people will be about policies directed toward achieving the end: the more people want something, the less they will be concerned about how they get it. This gives stupidity full rein to flourish in the absence of skeptical criticism. Only after officials have persisted for a long time in contrived foolishness to the point that their actions become unpopular and finally unacceptable will a government be forced to do something intelligent/right. This is basically what happened with

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a. Harold Stassen likened government to fire. As long as it stays within boundaries set by the people, it is a positive factor in their lives. However when it sets its own limits, it is like a fire out of control goes to excess and consumes everything it can including everything that supports it and finally, itself.

b. Conversely, a source of sick comedy to image-conscious insiders is an administrator who insists on abiding by and enforcing written rules and laws.

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American involvement in Vietnam and to Soviet dominated puppet states in eastern Europe.

In addition, politicians are liars. They have to be, as lying is a way to get support from others. This is not to say they lie all the time. Sometimes events fall into place so a pol can actually tell the truth, but (s)he has to be ready to lie at a moments notice and be good at it.[c] For others, the trick is not to find whom to believe but to be able to spot the better liar from the others. Why anyone heeds campaign promises is beyond the comprehension even of an expert in stupidity.

Generally in political organizations, the leader is a popular headman-the first among unequals. Aside from the fact that the wrong people often win office because anyone with self-respect cannot conduct a winning campaign,[11] as a central reference point,[12] an elected leader may play a largely symbolic role in that, most of the time, people know what to do anyway.[13] Oddly enough, in our modern societies, traditional patterns of political behavior have been strengthened by the emphasis of the role of the "Leading man" as a symbol to worship rather than as a doer to emulate.

The American public, for example, forms lasting impressions from a President's incidental gestures as representative of the people but pays relatively little attention to what he does as chief of state.[14] More and more, when demagogic leaders are chosen, they attain office because of their popular appeal rather than the validity or value of their publically stated policies.[15] As Harrison Otis noted before the 1800 presidential election, Jefferson's approach was "A very sweet smelling incense which flattery offers to vanity and folly at the shrine of falsehood".[16]

Now, this trend has reached the point that administrators now govern as if in a perpetual campaign[17] in which their actions are secondary to their slick, buttoned-down images, which in turn were by 1960 spot marketed commercially as perfectly wrapped products like so much toothpaste or soap.[18] The Madison Avenue mantra for a synthetic image was that any political personalty could be packaged without reference to any serious issues.[19] Richard Nixon at one point explained how much preparation was required to be spontaneous and, in addition, seem sincere.[20]

Sincerity aside, hairy heads seem to be the decisive factor in winning Presidential elections: Voters go for good heads of hair.[21] All this is rendered irrelevant because votes are tabulated by the National Election Pool–a secretive private organization accountable only to the four unnamed corporations which run it.[22] If we skip relevance for effectiveness, we note–as did the Romans[23]– that negative ads and personal attacks on opponents work in terms of winning if not informing the public who is the best candidate.

Actually, the leader really does not lead anymore. He is just there, like an elected monarch, giving a general tone to society and providing a focal point for the reverence of those who for some reason believe in the system. He also provides the media with an object of attention so that hundreds of photographers have someone to focus on and scores of reporters have someone to quote off the record. If any leading must be done while governing by image,[24] there is least friction if the people lead the headman where they want to go while the most effective leaders are those who can make people want to do what is necessary and make that appear to be right. Of course, stupidity thrives at best in the gray area between the appearance and actuality of necessity posing as desirable.[d] Beyond appearance, hard work and ambition trump (pun) a sense of justice and altruism as means to political success,[25] but even more important are perspicacity, intuition and will power.[26]

In terms of political organization, republics are particularly stupid, due to the temptation of representatives to give people what they want rather than what they need. All leaders are in danger of being told by their underlings what they want to hear rather than what they need to know,[27] and then they turn around do the same to the electorate, the truth usually getting mushed up in a campaign[28] culture of corruption.[29] Further, once elected, "Public servants" are seldom in a position even to consider what ought to be done[30] except in the context of getting re-elected. The inherent danger of gratifying the people in general is usually somewhat offset by the influence of special interest groups,[31] whose campaign contributions are a principle source of corruption[e] among elected officials and make many of their acts, if and when they are not revealed, appear to be as stupid to their constituents in the short run as they may prove to be embarrassing to the legislators in the long-run if they are. Not only does power tend to corrupt, but it tends to be eminently corruptible.

Franklin Roosevelt warned us of the deleterious influence of the special interest groups of his day[32] (presumably the securities and stock market gamblers) and spent millions bailing us out of the Depression. Eisenhower did likewise when he fingered the military-industrial complex in his farewell address[33] but to no practical effect: the "Bombs-R-Us" boys still got their nice little war in the '60's to the tune of billions. In the 1970's, it was the oil companies which shocked us with the price of gas. In the '80's, it was the savings and loan debacle; in the '90's, the internet bubble burst. Early in the 21st century, it was greedy bankers who led the country into a trillion dollar dumper through the unregulated Renewal Sale and Repurchase (RE-PO) market which brought the country to ruin if not[34] rack–another financial disaster

d. Justice is simply the matter of punishing the guilty and freeing the innocent (Plutarch. *Pompey*. 10) but judges and lawyers then get clever about "Guilt" and "Innocence".

e. A ruling by the Supreme Court in 2010 against Citizens United was denounced by former President Jimmy Carter as "....one of the stupidest ruling ever..." for rolling back restrictions on corporate spending in federal election campaigns. (Carter, Former Pres. J. Sept. 14, 2011.)

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brought to you by the devotees of laissez-fairytale capitalism.

Who will do it next is anyone's guess but the government will presumably go through the motions of regulating the financial industry via the FDIC, SEC, OCC, CFPB, FSOC and CFTC–lumpable together as the FUCU–scrabble around after the fact and then spend quadrillions saving the country without upsetting–indeed, while bailing out–those responsible for creating the mess. To put this back into a general context, in 2013, 11,000 lobbyists spent $3.2 billion in Washington[35] all to get the best government money can buy. It seems superfluous to add that the big, rich interests are organized, and poor, uneducated marginalized people are not.[36] All they can do is vote according to their perceptions and reactions to the slickest ad campaign.

Governments not only administer stupid laws ineffectively to address problems which may or may not exist[37] but also provide a professional judiciary to apply them unjustly. There was a time when people were judged by trials of combat, fire and water[f].[38] These were all based on a belief that trials were moral confrontations. If a person was judged favorably, it was because he was right relative to another individual or neutral nature. Those who deride such judicial mechanisms might take a good look at our modern jousting list-the court of law and where hired wits do battle[39] to determine the morality (guilt or innocence) of the person or system on trial. The hired guns-the lawyers-use all the tricks in and out of the book to win "Their" case. The jury determines who has the best lawyer,[40] and at best, judges preside to see that the game is played fairly while occasionally obstructing any real quest for the truth.[41] At worst, judges may[42] intervene to interpret formal rules according to the principle that the game should be fair but not too fair. Only slightly better is the fact that many cases are settled to the advantage of the reigning powers, which, put the other way, means were are condemned to injustice.[43]

In all seats of political power, be they administrative, legislative or judicial, ceremony shapes the ways in which personalities interact to solve and create real and imaginary problems. The preoccupation with most political officials is with the rituals of government. As long as these assure the likelihood that those in power will retain their positions, the rituals are honored as sacred. The impact of decisions reached under such circumstances is usually secondary to the desirability of main- taining decorum and giving speakers a chance to pronounce a few slogans for public consumption. Stability depends not on the validity of pronouncements but whether or not they satisfy the people. The regulation of society is considered secondary and is indirectly affected only when conservatives become convinced the status quo must be further preserved and protected or reformers can convince political hacks it really is in their own best interests to apply some common ideal to reality. As many have noted, if you are not a liberal in your twenties, you have no heart; if you are a liberal in your forties, you have no head.[44]

As always, the biggest threat to the state is the man who thinks for himself[45] and, ironically, lives up to the rules because–cognitive dissonance aside–at the first sign of intellectual integrity, the state totters because then everyone else is shown up as a shallow faker. In this context, the Puritans never tired of denouncing the "Civil" man–one who was a good citizen, obeyed the laws, discharges his social obligations and never injures others. Such a paragon of virtue was continually reminded by the preacher that he was on his way to hell.[46] To put it another way, there is no one so infuriating as one who lives up to the rules. Don't we all cheat a bit? Isn't everyone a bit dirty? And if someone does not or is not, how is he treated? Well, I know of one case like that, and he was crucified.

Of course, there are always calls for civic reform. When, on Dec. 27, 2007, Senator Barack Obama hyped America's call for "A new politics", he was refreshingly stale. It was precisely what Fred Eissler, (who?) local director of the Santa Barbara Sierra Club thirty-eight years earlier offered after an offshore oil spill.[47] Fred did not get his new politics, and we got partisanship as usual and scandals at the VA and IRS. I suppose every forty years or so we will get a call for if not the actuality of a new politics, so expect another circa 2050. Meanwhile, we will suffer along with the hypocrisy, cynicism and egotism of self-serving elites espousing the rhetoric of democracy[48] or slamming it as being as stupid, uneducated and selfish as the democratic people are.[49]

However politics are practiced in America, we have two unsolvable problems which doom us to failure while defining who we are: 1.) Special interest groups–e.g., corporations, the NRA and Zionists; 2.) our debilitating if not suicidal commitment to prolonged deficit spending. There is no way any American government can deal intelligently with these problems any more than Catholic Mexico can curb its rampant overpopulation.

Viva estupidez. ☺

f. The idea here was that a bound up guilty person would be rejected by water and float. This was challenged, in 1662, in Connecticut by a skeptic who opined that anyone in such a condition would float and offered himself as a test. Unfortunately for his cause and himself he sank. (Tomlinson. 34.)

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   As a personal aside, when explaining to acquaintances why I never vote, I cite my experience with the election in 1964. I was told, "If you vote for Goldwater, we will bomb North Vietnam". I voted for Goldwater, and, sure enough, we bombed North Vietnam. Candidates are all a bunch of liars. The say whatever is necessary to get nominated; then they say whatever is necessary to get elected; then they do whatever is necessary to get re-elected. If anyone is dumb enough to think otherwise, read on. Further, my one, individual vote never would have made a difference anyway, so I do not waste my time picking and choosing among self-serving liars to cast a vote that does not matter anyway.
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